

TOPICAL SERMONS



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"God Over All!"

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We're turning this morning to Psalm number 9, the ninth Psalm, and we'll read the whole Psalm. There's only two verses that I want us to concentrate on this morning, but we'll read the whole Psalm to get the context. Reading from verse one:

"I will praise thee, O Lord, with my whole heart; I will show forth all thy marvellous works. I will be glad and rejoice in thee: I will sing praises to thy name, O thou most High. When mine enemies are turned back, they shall fall and perish at thy presence. For thou hast maintained my right and my cause; thou satest in the throne judging right. Thou hast rebuked the heathen, thou hast destroyed the wicked, thou hast put out their name for ever and ever. O thou enemy, destructions are come to a perpetual end: and thou hast destroyed cities; their memorial is perished with them. But the Lord shall endure for ever: he hath prepared his throne for judgment. And he shall judge the world in righteousness, he shall minister judgment to the people in uprightness. The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee. Sing praises to the Lord, which dwelleth in Zion: declare among the people his doings. When he maketh inquisition for blood, he remembereth them: he forgetteth not the cry of the humble. Have mercy upon me, O Lord; consider my trouble which I suffer of them that hate me, thou that liftest me up from the gates of death: That I may show forth all thy praise in the gates of the daughters of Zion: I will rejoice in thy salvation. The heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net which they hid is their foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which he executeth: the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. Higgaion. The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God. For the needy shall not always be forgotten: the expectation of the poor shall not perish for ever. Arise, O Lord; let not man prevail: let the heathen be judged in thy sight. Put them in fear, O Lord: that the nations may know themselves to be but men."

Let's take a moment's prayer together: Our dear Father in heaven, we pray to Thee today, that the blessed Lord Jesus Christ in His risen exalted power, may presence Himself with us. That He may come by His Spirit, and Lord them that have needs, them that are oppressed, them who are in times of trouble, may know what it is to find their refuge in the Lord. Fill me, I pray, with Thy Spirit, and help me in Jesus name, Amen.

Sam Scholl (sp?) was an American who settled his farm in Arizona. And out in that deserted place with his wife and his family, he pitched his tent and he began to farm. A few nights after he had moved there was a fierce storm, and within that desert everything was turned upside-down, the rain and the hail came down and the high winds blew. And after that night of awful storm, at daybreak Sam got out of his bed and, feeling quite sick and ill, fearing what might have come to pass, he went out to survey the loss. The hail had beaten the garden, the vegetable patch was destroyed into the ground, the house was partially unroofed, the hen-house with all the hens and chickens - it had totally been destroyed and there were dead carcasses of little hens all over the farm. Destruction and devastation were all around. And while he stood dazed, dismayed, evaluating the situation - he wondered what was left and what would happen in the future. Suddenly he heard a little sound, and a rooster began to climb out of the debris. It climbed to the top plank that it could find, and there it stood, dripping wet, most of its feathers gone, standing there on the horizon of destruction -- and it just crowed. Pathetic scene isn't it? As that animal, almost dead, flaps its bony wings, and proudly crows. But it tells us this: that in the midst of destruction and the vilest and most acute oppression that a human being or even a beast can face, there is a spirit, there is an attitude that prevails -- that enables a person to be able to climb on top of the debris, and for a split second forget about all the destruction that is around them, and crow in pride, the pride of their God, and praise the Lord.

That is the situation of David that we find in Psalm 9. And I want us to concentrate this morning, for a few moments on verses 9 and 10 -- look at them: "The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee." Perhaps at the top of that Psalm in your Bible you'll have this little strange title: 'Muth-labben', Muth-labben -- it's a Hebrew expression. And some of the scholars have debated about what this really means, some of them believe that this

signifies the tune that the Psalm is to be sung to. Some think it is the instrument, the musical instrument to be played. Some even feel it maybe is the soloist that is to sing this Psalm. If it's only these things, we can be sure that there's nothing in this title to teach us from the word of God. But if you look into the Chaldean version of the Old Testament, that's the version that those in Babylon read, by the Chaldean language. You find that they translate this title 'Muth-labben' as this, written on top of their Psalm is this: 'Concerning the death of the champion who went out between the camps'. Concerning the death of the champion, the warrior, who went out between the two camps. And indeed many scholars feel that 'Muth-labben' means this: 'The death of a son'. Many believe David to have taken up his pen many years after he defeated Goliath there on the battlefield, and written this Psalm declaring the glory of God, praising God for his wonderful deliverance through God. And as we look at this Psalm, and as we look and read about the oppression, the wicked that seem to be growing and thriving and as we read down it and read about the enemy in verse 6 and verse 3, we can look and we can see there, by the eye of faith, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Isn't it wonderful to know that we have a victorious Saviour! Isn't it? Verse six reads: "O thou enemy, destructions are come to a perpetual end: and thou hast destroyed cities; their memorial is perished with them." We can declare to our enemy today, upon the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, we can declare: the enemy is defeated! We have a Conqueror! And what a message to discouraged saints, to those who are downtrodden, to those that are oppressed in this life, or maybe even feeling it's so hard to be a Christian in the days in which we live: here is a song of victory, declaring that our Conqueror, the King of kings, the Lord of lords - not will have the victory - but He has conquered! And on His thigh, and on His vesture is written the name 'The King of kings, the Lord of lords, The Conqueror of all flesh and spirit'.

If you look at verses one and two of the Psalm, you see that Psalm 9 is almost an overflow of the praise that we find in Psalm 8. Look at Psalm 8, it's a famous one: "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! Who hast set thy glory above the heavens." - and then verse 9, it ends - "O Lord our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!". And then David continues: "I will praise thee, O Lord, with my whole heart", not half-hearted, "I will show forth all thy marvellous works. I will be glad and rejoice in thee: I will sing praise to thy name, O most High". The text that we have taken also speaks of His name, verse 10: "And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee". You see it's the name, the name of God. It is the name of Christ, the name of the Holy Spirit, the name of the blessed triune God, the three-in-one, that we praise. We are to lift our praises onto Him, and David as he has ringing in his ears Psalm 8, the praise of it, continues in Psalm 9 talking about this great name that is worthy to be praised. You remember the song of the Shulamite young girls, the daughters of Jerusalem? In Song of Songs in chapter 1 and verse 4 they cry to the bridegroom, and we can see typologically there the Saviour and the church, the Christian and the Christ - and they say: 'Draw me, and we will run after thee: the king hath brought me into his chambers: we will be glad and rejoice in thee, we will remember thy love more than wine: the upright love thee.'

Do you rejoice? Do you? Do you praise the Lord with a heart full of adoration and gratitude for how He is your deliverer, for what He has done in your life? And you might say 'But David you don't realise what I'm going through this morning. You don't realise the burdens that are on my heart. I find it hard at times even to speak in a nice way to my friends, to my husband or to my wife, because of what I'm going through let alone bring a joyous song out of my heart to God!' Yet John in Revelation 19 and [verse] 7 speaks to a church that is going through persecution and says to them: 'Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready'. Oh how sweet the name of Jesus sounds, doesn't it? It doesn't matter - or it ought not to matter - what you're going through; and I am not underestimating the problems of life - far be it from me. But oh how it transcends the problems when we hear whispered by the Holy Ghost of God the sweet name of Jesus!

It's that name that is talked about in verse 10: the name of Christ, our victorious Redeemer. And what I want to bring to you today is three messages: first of all, there is a refuge for the oppressed. Look at verse 9: 'The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble'. We've just been reading about how God one day will judge the wicked, and it may seem at the moment that they're getting away, literally, with murder - but there is a day when God will judge! And God will sit on His throne, and the wicked, the sinful, those outside of Christ will have to answer to Him. And after talking about how God is a judge to the wicked, David tells how God is a refuge to the oppressed. You know what oppression is don't you? Oppression can come in many shapes and forms -- there can be oppression from Satan, there can be oppression from men and women, from family, from circumstances. And the Hebrew word that's used here for 'oppressed' -- do you know what it means? 'Crushed, injured, afflicted'. Do you ever feel like that?

Crushed! Destroyed! Injured! Deep affliction and oppression in your soul -- but he goes on and talks about oppression and times of trouble. That Hebrew expression 'times of', it can be translated [like] this: 'A due long season'.

You know what I'm talking about, don't you? Something that you think is never going to end, the light [at the end] of the tunnel - you've long gone stopped hoping for it! You feel it's never going to come, you're never going to have an end of this long due season of oppression, of destruction, of that deepest injuring of your soul. What does he say: 'Oppression and times of trouble'. Know what that word means? Listen: 'tightness' - you know the feeling within your soul, you feel as if someone's wringing out your spirit in the very depths of your soul with worry, or anxiety, or the things that you are facing. That word means a rival, an adversary, affliction, anguish, distress, tribulation of an enemy! And some of you know what I'm talking about all too well, for every morning you awake it's on your mind. It's at the back, and even if it's not there in the morning, it works its way to the front, and before the sun goes down you're thinking about that oppression, that destruction, that anguish, that tightness within your soul that oppresses you from day to day. My friend listen! The message of God to your heart is this: 'We have a refuge!' God is our refuge.

In the Old Testament there was something called a city of refuge. Have you heard about it? You see if you accidentally knocked someone down, or accidentally killed someone in work and you didn't mean it, there was no intent in it: it wasn't murder, it was only manslaughter. If you did that there were various cities, and we read in the book of Numbers that there were six cities around Palestine where you could flee - and once you got beyond the walls of that city you were free! No one could touch you. It's amazing: there were six of them, and they were distributed throughout the land at proper distances from one another. You know why? So that everybody had a chance. And as they were distributed all of them were convenient to people, no one had an excuse, they were in every part of the land, and it was said that they were situated on high precipices, high places so that they might be easily seen from a distance. Do you get it? It says that the roads to them were always continually kept in a good state, and on each road there were signs that were written: 'Refuge, refuge!' My friend, it's a tragedy isn't it? That so many never see the refuge of the Lord Jesus Christ - isn't it? Oh, it's blatantly obvious - there are six refuge cities - the gospel is preached all over our land, so that everybody's given a chance, all the roads to the gospel - the road of the 'whosoever will' - is cleared. God has a signpost, the word of God, the preaching of the gospel: 'Refuge, refuge!' pointing to the cross! But maybe you're here today, and you miss it every time. Do you? And you know that oppression, you know that tightness, you know that feeling of being shattered - that painful anguish within the depths of your soul: well listen to Paul in the book of Hebrews, 'That by two immutable things in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation who have fled for refuge!'. Have you? What does a boat do when it's out fishing in the middle of the ocean and the storm comes? It flees for refuge into the harbour. What do the little chicks do when they feel they're lost or in trouble? They flee under the wing of the hen mother, where there is safety, where there is refuge. And my friend, if you're not converted, flee to the cross!

A few weeks ago, when I was having my devotional time with the Lord, I was looking in the Psalms - and I try to read a Psalm every day. And I thought of Psalm 46, considering the refuge of God, and you know it all: 'God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.' And my Psalm for that particular day was Psalm 18, if you would turn to it for a moment with me, Psalm 18. And I think it's important, you know, when we're talking to the Lord and reading the word of God, that we try and picture what is being written here. Now we can let our imaginations run away with us, that's not what I'm talking about - but trying to picture with the eye of faith what is written before us. And we read in verse one and two: 'I will love thee, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my' - here's the first description - 'rock...my fortress...my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, and my high tower'. Now I couldn't read any further - look at the mighty descriptions that is being given of God and His strength! God is a refuge! Do you know what I did? I took my notebook and a little pen and I thought of God as my rock, and I drew a mountain. You know, a mountain, a large rock - that's my God. He is a fortress! And upon that rock of a mountain I put a castle. He is my deliverer - I put a knight in shining armour approaching that castle, strong, invincible there. He is my buckler - and there that knight had a shield. He is the horn of my salvation, and - like a unicorn - upon that horse there was a horn coming from its forehead. And, oh, I could see in all those pictures of God, the Holy Spirit giving to me, how my God is a refuge! Do you see it? A rock! A castle! A shield! A fortress! A deliverer!

You might say: 'David, well I don't feel that God is that for me at the moment'. You know if we go through scripture we find that some of the refuges of God don't seem like refuges at the time. Do you remember Jonah? Do you think when he was swallowed into the belly of that fish, and he was swimming up and down in the lactic acids of his belly, that he thought he was in a refuge? Not a bit of it! But he was! He was [in] refuge [from] the storm, he had been cast overboard, he would've been drowned, but God had him there - and it didn't seem a refuge at the time, but it was! Do you think, when Miriam was watching that little basket going up the Nile, that river - and then the daughter of Pharaoh, who he was trying to escape from - the whole household of Pharaoh - came and lifted the little basket and brought it into her home. I'm sure the first thought that she had was: 'That's the end, the child's dead' - but that was God's refuge! And perhaps there's something strange happening in your life, my friend, and you can't see God in it. Well that thing might be God itself. Do you know what I mean? God may be using that dreaded, awful thing to protect you.

It's true, isn't it, that we never appreciate a refuge unless we're in times of trouble. Remember Daniel in the lion's den? If he was singing Psalm 46 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.' - he might have thought: 'Well, He wouldn't have me in the middle of this! What kind of a refuge-God is He, having me in a den of lions?' But God was his refuge! Hard to see, isn't it? What about the three Hebrew children in the fiery furnace, you would have thought they would have been saying: 'Well if God is a refuge, then He wouldn't be letting me be thrown into this, He would have delivered me before it all'. But God delivered them! Are you oppressed? Well, listen: God is a refuge for the oppressed.

But secondly, look at verse 10: 'And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for the Lord hast not forsaken them that seek thee'. Our salvation and our faith is one of knowledge. Remember Paul: 'I know whom I have believed' - it's a faith of knowledge, it's an intelligent faith. And the church of Rome might say: 'Ignorance is the mother of devotion' - but rather 'Ignorance is the mother of unbelief'. That's why they worship an 'unknown' God - they don't have a precious relationship with a personal Saviour. But we know - or we ought to know - our God: 'By his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many' - by knowledge! Do you know Him? The knowledge is found in verse 10: 'know thy name' - that's the knowledge - 'trust in thee' - that's the faith, the experience is 'thou hast not forsaken them'. You know ignorance sends millions to hell, but ignorance in the life of a believer prevents them knowing a refuge in Christ. Did you know that? Do you know the name of your God, do you? The name of your Saviour?

Perhaps you're bereaved today - do you know what His name is to you? 'I am the resurrection and the life'. Perhaps, as you sit, you're fearful of what the future might hold - perhaps you've got results of a test or you're worried about some disease that might rise its head up again - and He says to you as He said to John at His feet: 'I am the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the ending, I know everything, and everything is in my control'. And if you're sick: He is the Great Physician. If you're a widow: He is the Bridegroom and the Husband of your heart. If you're fatherless: He is the Everlasting Father. If you're a sinner: He is the Saviour! If you're simple, read the book of Proverbs, and you feel that you don't know enough: and we find there that He is the wisdom to man's head and man's heart. If you're needing guidance and you can't find the way: He's the Wonderful Counsellor. If you're in the middle of turmoil: He is the Prince of Peace. If you're hungry: He is the Bread of Life. If you're at a dead-end street: He says, 'I am the door'. And if you're wandering - and some of you are: He is the Great Shepherd.

Jehovah-Jireh: Do you know the name of your God? This is the name that you're meant to have refuge in, that you're meant to feel safe in, that you're meant to know the security of God's salvation and life in! Jehovah-Jireh: your provider. Jehovah-Tsidkenu: your righteousness. Jehovah-Shammah: God, Jehovah is there. Jehovah-Shalom: my peace. Jehovah-Nissi: my banner. Elohim: the strong one! El-Gibbor: the great God. Spurgeon said: 'Every one of these names anchors the soul from the drifting seasons of peril'.

You know the Egyptians, in the old times, used to live in the marshes and the bogs: the marshy place, where all the flies and the locusts, and all the things that bit, came and bit them - and they were tormented day and night with gnats. You know what they used to do? They used to sleep in the high tower, where those creatures were not able to soar high, and they were delivered from the bite. My friend, God wants to rise you above, in the refuge of the rock, in the fortress of your salvation. He wants you to find in Christ a refuge in them that know His name - but you need to know His name, you need to know the great God that you have: well, will you trust Him? For He says in verse 10 that He hath not forsaken them that seek Thee - He is a refuge for those who seek Him! Have you sought Him in salvation? Have you sought Him in your trouble? John Trapp says: 'We never trust a man till we know him, and bad men are

better known than trusted. Not so with the Lord, for where His name is ointment poured forth the virgins love Him, fear Him, rejoice in Him and repose upon Him'. Do you see your Saviour this morning? Do you? The blessed Lord Jesus Christ, your Victor, your Conqueror, your Deliverer who can be a refuge and a protector to you in the midst of your trouble. No wonder the hymn-writer could write: 'Oh hope of every contrite heart. Oh joy of all the meek, to those who fall how kind Thou art, how good to those who seek. But what to those who find, ah this, nor tongue nor pen can show, the love of Jesus what it is - none but His loved ones know'.

Let us pray, and if you're in our meeting today and you're not a Christian, you're not saved, or you are a Christian and you're going through turmoil and perhaps no one beside you or around you, or the nearest and dearest, know what you're going through. Well, listen to the word of God: 'The Lord also will be a refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And they that know thy name will put their trust in thee: for thou, Lord, hast not forsaken them that seek thee'.

Our Father we thank Thee that the Lord Jesus Christ and His cross, is the city of our refuge - the place that we are saved from the consequences and the judgement of our sin, and the place in the times of our trouble where we can shield the storm, where the wind does not blow upon us, and where we have perfect peace and rest. May the troubled one today, whether troubled in their sin, or in sickness or sorrow - that they may hear the voice of Jesus say to them, 'Come, all ye that labour and are heavy laden and find rest for your soul'. For we pray these things, asking Thy blessing upon us now in Jesus worthy and precious name. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - June 2000

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"A Time To Cry"

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If you have a copy of the word of God with you today, we're turning to Psalm 74 for our reading of the word of God. I have been, on these Lord's Day mornings, taking you through a series on the Sermon on the Mount, but it is expedient at times - as the Lord leads - to interrupt certain series and deal with things that, I believe, the Spirit of God would lead me to deal with. This is a message that has been burning on my heart ever since, in my own devotions and meditations at home before the Lord, this Psalm has been given to me. I've felt led, this morning, to bring it to you and I want you - please - to listen to it in the light of that - in the light of the fact that it is the word of God, and in no more sense should you listen to this any more than you should listen to everything that is preached from this pulpit. But I do believe that God would see us listen to Him, and obey Him, from the words of this Psalm. So please do ponder these things as I bring them to you from the Lord, and as I bring them to my own heart. Please do obey the word of God as we hear it this morning.

Verse 1: "O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? Why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old; the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt. Lift up thy feet unto the perpetual desolations; even all that the enemy hath done wickedly in the sanctuary. Thine enemies roar in the midst of thy congregations; they set up their ensigns for signs. A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees. But now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers. They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name to the ground. They said in their hearts, Let us destroy them together: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land. We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long. O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? Shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever? Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? Pluck it out of thy bosom. For God is my King of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth. Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength: thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness. Thou didst cleave the fountain and the flood: thou driedst up mighty rivers. The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun. Thou hast set all the borders of the earth: thou hast made summer and winter. Remember this, that the enemy hath reproached, O Lord, and that the foolish people have blasphemed thy name. O deliver not the soul of thy turtledove unto the multitude of the wicked: forget not the congregation of thy poor for ever. Have respect unto the covenant: for the dark places of the earth are full of the habitations of cruelty. O let not the oppressed return ashamed: let the poor and needy praise thy name. Arise, O God, plead thine own cause: remember how the foolish man reproacheth thee daily. Forget not the voice of thine enemies: the tumult of those that rise up against thee increaseth continually".

My message is entitled: "A Time To Cry" - a time to cry. Solomon said in Ecclesiastes chapter 3 and verse 4: 'There is a time to weep, and there is a time to laugh; there is a time to mourn, and there is a time to dance'. In some quarters of the church there is a great emphasis today on laughing and on dancing. Today it seems that the church, God's people, sleep instead of weep. They are merry instead of mourning. I do not believe that the church today, especially in the West, is living in a day of laughter and in a day of rejoicing. They might feel themselves to be, they might have been spellbound like those in Galatians chapter 3, where Paul could say to them: 'Who hath bewitched you', who has cast this spell, hypnotised you into believing something as it is not? I believe that, for the child of God today, our day should be a day of weeping and a day of mourning. I believe that it is a time to cry.

In this Psalm God's children of old are standing, as we have been learning on Monday nights, in a wrecked Jerusalem - a bit like Jerusalem tonight. There they are standing in the midst of the temple, in all the rubble, in all that the Babylonian Empire has destroyed and wrecked, in the ruins of a devastated place where God used be worshipped. There they are in a place destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, and the visible sign of God's presence, the visible sign of God's pleasure in His people, has been wiped off the face of the earth. They stand confused, beside themselves, at the end of their tether - they do not know what to do, for as far as they can see God, the covenant God, has left His covenant people! He has forsaken His covenant! That's why they cry in verse 1: 'O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever?'

There is a despairing cry - God, it seems, is not among His people any more. The enemy is advancing, and Satan's activity is more evident than God's is. That's what they are saying - in verse 4 and 5 it talks about the enemy, and how the enemy is in the very midst of God's temple, in the dwelling place of God. The enemy seems to be able to do as he likes, and the people of God are standing impotent and absolutely helpless as the enemy advances into God's territory!

Now my question to us today, and the message that burns upon my heart, is this: is this not happening now? Is it not the case that it seems that Satan is more evident than God? Does it not seem that the presence of evil, and the presence of the very devil himself, can be witnessed more than the presence of Almighty God? Our churches, generally, seem to be emptying. Great Britain's heritage that once was glorious is being swamped by a sea of religious pluralism and ecumenism. Churches are being, every year, transformed into mosques, into carpet warehouses. Christian doctrines are being burnt to the ground, to rubble and ruins. So-called evangelicals are denying the reality of hell - 'You're just dead and done for, you don't live on, you have not an immortal soul'.

Many of the preachers of the word of God are turning to immoral lifestyles. Some theologians are denying the truth of the virgin birth, original sin - 'You're not born in sin'. Some have even lifted up their voice to defy what God has revealed in His sovereign truth, that the atoning work of Christ is the only way that any man or woman will get through the gates of heaven and have eternal life. Men, and bishops, and hierarchy in churches denying that the Lord Jesus Christ rose on the third day from the grave and was victorious over life and death. They deny that He will come again - 'Where is the promise of His coming?', they say. Churches and systems seem to be uniting together, even the church of Rome, and they all seem to be opposing this doctrine that we hold so dear: of justification by faith alone.

'Not by the labour of my hands,
Could I fill God's laws demands'.

'Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone:
Thou must save, and Thou alone!'

In the next couple of weeks we face an impending general election, and there will most likely be a second term of a Labour government that seeks to take all remembrance of God and dismantle it. I don't know whether you see the future as bleak as I do, the possibility of it being bleak. But even among God's people - among that remnant that there are that still believe that the Bible is the word of God, that still believe in the fundamental doctrines of the faith - there is still a cause for despair, there is still a reason to cry: 'O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever?'. Why? One: because I believe there is a satisfaction with our spiritual lukewarmness. There is a satisfaction to stay the way we are at this moment, and 'If it goes along like this for good, I'll be happy'.

There is a desire in high echelons of theological knowledge to wrangle over foolish questions and let the world go to hell. There is a willingness to have a 'one night stand' with the church, without committing yourself to the vows of fellowship and putting your shoulder to pushing the wheel. There is a materialism that has made many spellbound, and has muffled their ears to the call of Christ: 'Take up your cross and follow Me. Deny yourself and follow Me. Him that loses his life shall find it, and him that saves his life shall lose it'. I feel, friends, that we would have to be blind if we cannot see that the presence and the power of God that was so often distinct in meetings, even in this place and in the land of Ulster, God's power is absent!

In my life and in your life, there is a toleration of sin that too often causes us to fall. The condition of the whole generally, is too often the disposition of our hearts personally. What is going on around us in the church and in our land just reflects what is coming out of our heart, and the dedication and the commitment that we have to the Lord Jesus Christ. But my question, as we look at this Psalm, is: do you see yourself standing in the rubble? Can you see this? Or is it just me? It seems that God is not among His people, at least in the way that He once was! Do you find - like many people I have spoken to even in this assembly - that there is a dark cloud, it seems, hovering over us shutting out the life of God's blessing, and the light from shining in upon us and bringing life?

Now I know, and I want you to beware - and I have to be absolutely honest at this - I hear, sometimes, people saying how well we're doing here. I think we are doing well in comparison with some things that are going on in this nation at this time, and some churches that are dwindling - but I want you to beware of that voice, because I believe that voice is from the very depths of hell! Because such people, who say those things, are not listening to God's word!

I want you to turn with me to 2 Corinthians 10, and I want this to settle this, and I want no-one ever in this assembly to take the attitude: 'We're doing better than anybody else, or we're doing as well as anyone else - let's just be content'. Second Corinthians 10 and verse 12, and Paul is speaking: 'For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise!' I would remind you of another verse of Scripture in Corinthians: 'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall'.

Now, my friends, there are two things that I want to leave with you. I'm asking you: is there in your heart, first of all, what was in the Psalmist's heart - and it is this: a cry of despair at the enemy's advances? Is there, in your heart at this moment, a cry of despair at the enemy's advances? He says: 'Lord, have You cast us off? Have You left us? Have You gone away from us? We sense the retraction and subtraction of Your presence from among us, things are not the way they used to be!'. Spurgeon says: 'When a church is in a forsaken condition it must not sit still in apathy, but turn to the hand that smiteth it and humbly inquire the reason why'.

Now, we believe in eternal security - thank God for it - and we believe that God can never cast His people off finally, and even when He does seem to cast us off it is in His goodness to waken us up and to draw us back to Himself. There are three illustrations that the Psalmist gives, at least in this Psalm, of how he is despairing at the enemy's advances. The first is found in verse 1, it is: smoke damaged sheep - smoke damaged sheep - 'Why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?'. This is almost unthinkable! It is a mercy, even in this verse, that it is smoke, it's not fire. It is smoke - in other words, the point is: the sign of God's anger is upon God's people. Literally His wrath is not poured out upon them, but this is a sign of God's anger - God is not smoking here against His enemy, God is smoking at His own sheep. As the children of God watch that smoke rising from the temple, rising from the ruins of Jerusalem, they begin to

realise and correctly interpret it that God is angry with them! God is smoking against them! What they are doing in verse 1 is: they are asking that God would remove all signs of His displeasure with them. I believe that God's Holy Spirit is grieved, and I believe that that is a serious thing - and I believe that's why we find ourselves under a cloud of smoke.

There are smoke damaged sheep and the second thing is: a lion in the sanctuary. If you look at verse 4: 'Thine enemies roar in the midst of thy congregations; they set up their ensigns for signs'. There is a lion and, as the Babylonians came in and wrecked Jerusalem, that is exactly what Satan wants to do with the church! Do you believe that? Do you believe that Satan is alive? Do you believe that Satan is real? Do you believe that Satan has a plan for your life to destroy it, and to make you as unusable for God as possible? Satan would seek to wreck the church, and indeed wreck this church. He has some of us, personally, between his teeth. He is the one who walks about like a lion seeking whom he may devour. The Psalmist says: 'Thine enemies roar in the midst of thy congregations' - where there was once the singing of angels, there is the roaring of beasts. Where our forefathers once praised God, they now blaspheme His name - and the cleric and the theologian cry aloud in their denials of our Lord's blood and of His person.

In verse 4 we see it says: 'They set up their ensigns for signs'. In other words, when they pulled that temple down they took in their military and their pagan religious emblems and set them up in God's temple! What a picture of today! What a picture of this very moment, where sins of every kind from sodomy to dead orthodoxy have been enshrined in the house of God, and men and women in the world look at this and say: 'This is Christianity?'. The idolatry of Romanism has been embraced by the Protestant churches, whose forefathers went to the flames rather than endorse such a transgression of God's first and second commandments. This is the day that we're living in - but it seems that God people are anaesthetised, desensitised, that it's happening!

In verse 5 he depicts the evil one as them all 'lifting up axes upon the thick trees'. The picture is of a lumberjack in the forest furiously turning at each tree and knocking it down, destroying everything in his sight. He is saying: 'The enemies of God are destroying the beauties of the temple with the violence of a woodman'. Does that not seem like now to you? Does it not seem that everywhere we look something is being lost, that nothing is sacred? We're no longer surprised when the next great warrior of God falls, or another outright sin is made law from our government. It doesn't surprise us any more when a fundamental doctrine of the word of God is diluted or utterly denied by those who take the name of Christ! It doesn't surprise us that, today, men are proud in destroying what their fathers were proud in erecting. Gone are the days when men used to wield their axe against sturdy trees of error and false doctrine and heresy - and they're turning it upon themselves in the church of Jesus Christ, and felling as diligently as they can the truths that their forefathers built!

In verse 6 the Psalmist described how the sledgehammer is smashing the word of God and the gospel of God while the church is asleep. In verse 8 he tells us that the evil one has extinguished that flame - the evil one is 'destroying them altogether: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land'. Oh, my friend, the Lord Jesus said that the gates of hell would not prevail against His church, but that infers that the gates of hell seek to prevail against His church. Do we see that what the devil wants in Ulster, what the devil wants here in the Iron Hall, is to extinguish the flame of the gospel and godliness and holiness? He has resorted again to his only and old plan. Our government is doing it for him, our monarchy has become the devil's lapdogs as they enshrine adultery, fornication, Islam!

Oh, there is a lion in God's sanctuary - and thirdly there is an extinction of prophets. If you look at verse 9: 'We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long'. 'There are no prophets of God. We see their signs, their signs are going up in abundance, but we don't see God's signs. We see the hostile signs of the Babylonian military, we see the signs of pagan religious ritual

everywhere - but where are the signs of Jehovah? Where are His altars? Where are His sacrifices? They're nowhere to be seen! Where are the miraculous interventions of God on our behalf? Like the Red Sea, like the prophets of Baal - where is our God who used to interject in our affairs to deliver us?'. He is conspicuously absent.

Now listen: will we wait until there is no sign of God in Ulster at all before we do something? Are we going to wait? Just wait until all that we see is godlessness, and pagan idolatry, and apostate religion. We who are the people of God, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, we are the ones who can make a change with our prayers and our lives, and with the preaching of the word of God. Are we going to wait until there is nothing only evil in this nation?

The prophets voice was silenced at this particular time - and you remember from our studies of Ezekiel that, indeed, Ezekiel was told: 'I will make thy tongue cleave to the roof of thy mouth, that thou shalt be dumb, and shalt not be to them a reprover: for they are a rebellious house'. The point here is that there was absolutely no-one who knew how long this would go on. There were no prophets to give the people of God guidance. There were no prophets to tell the people of God what to do. There was no-one there to lead them, to guide them, to direct them and teach them. Men of spiritual perception and discernment were extinct, and no wonder the Psalmist in another place could cry: 'Help Lord, for the godly man ceaseth, for the faithful fail from among the children of men'. There are no godly men left to guide, to direct!

Ask yourself for one moment - I want you, you see I'm trying to pull you from this era into now and see that we're in the midst of it! Ask: where is the Christian voice in our nation today? If you watch the television you will see that it has been relegated to a position of absolute insignificant ranting of idiots! It is scorned, it is laughed upon! Things that were once the very foundations that made this nation great are decried as humorous! We may ask: where are God's divine interventions in our lives? Where are the miraculous works of God among us? Where is the conviction of sin in the pew that weeps, that cries uncontrollably, and shouts out in the midst of absolute anguish of sin upon them: 'What must I do to be saved?'. Where is it? Where are the godly men who can discern the need of the hour, and lead the people of God to repentance and blessing?

There is a famine in the land - oh, that we would realise it, that we would realise that there is a famine among the church, there is a famine among society. All of the institutions that we have held dear for years and years are crumbling under a foundation that is false, because they are not built upon the word of God - and, if the truth be told, our lives are not either! There is a need for an awakening - and if you don't believe it, well then I will reserve you to absolute finishing in God's calendar and scheme. If you want to just go out in a blaze of 'unglory', if you just want to die and go to heaven empty-handed - well, you do it! But we're not all going to do it!

My friends, we need an awakening in the Iron Hall! We need an awakening in Ulster, for I believe it is our only hope! You know that I read a great deal about the Isle of Lewis revival. Before the awakening that island was in dire straits, spiritually there was a great fear - but we, I believe, are a hundred-fold worse. It was a place that had once experienced umpteen revivals, and refreshings of the presence of the Lord through the Holy Spirit. But they had grown cold and indifferent, and in the view of that situation the Free Church Presbytery of Lewis made the following declaration in the Stornoway Gazette and the West Coast Adviser, and they publicly expressed their deep concern.

I want you to listen to this, this is what they wrote in the press: 'The Presbytery of Lewis, having taken into consideration' - listen - 'the low state of vital religion within their own bounds, and throughout the land generally, call upon their faithful people in all their congregations' - listen - 'to take a serious view of the present dispensation of divine displeasure - not only in the chaotic conditions of international politics and morality, but also and especially in the lack of spiritual power from the Gospel, and to realise that these

things clearly indicate that the Most High has a controversy with the nation! The Presbytery goes on: '...affectionately plead with their people, especially with the youth of the church, to take these matters to heart and to make serious inquiry as to what must be the end should there be no repentance! They call upon every individual, as before God, to examine his or her life in the light of what responsibility pertains to us all - that happily, in divine mercy, we may be visited with a spirit of repentance and may turn again unto the Lord whom we have so grieved with our iniquities and our waywardness'.

Now, my friend, they were nowhere near the state that our generation is in now. Nowhere near! It is for this reason I believe, for us here, it is time to seek the Lord. It is time to sow to yourself righteousness, to reap in mercy, to break up the fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord till He come and rain righteousness upon you. I don't know about you, but I am tired of hypocrisy in my life, I am tired of powerless fruitlessness - and I believe it is time for me to seek the Lord, is it not high time for us to take God's word seriously? Is it not high time to follow Him fully? Will you come with me?

You know there are some men in this Assembly who have been exercised to have a day of prayer and fasting - and we're going to do it. We're going to do it on the tenth of June, Sunday the tenth of June. Maybe it would be impossible for you to do that, and that's okay, you don't have to do it. But in our own personal homes, in our lives, we're going to fast - some of us - and you may join us on that date: for the land, for our church, for our own individual families who are not saved, for our personal shortcomings and fallings. Maybe you can't fast for medical reasons, well, have bread and water for the day or whatever you can have - but do something! This church will be open, and if you can't get peace at home you can come here and pray. But my friends, the cry of my heart is this: whatever we do, we must not do nothing!

What motivates such a thing? I'll tell you what motivates it: a cry of a desire that God would vindicate Himself, that's what it is. What you find in verses 9 to 23. Look at verse 3, the Psalmist says: 'Lift up your feet!' Lift up your feet - do you know what he's saying? 'Hurry up Lord! Hurry up, and come and examine this situation, this rubble that the enemy has left. Come and see the desolation'. In other words it's a bit like what David was saying to his brothers: 'Is there not a cause?'. Is there not cause for us to get on our faces before the living God and fast and pray that He will bless us? Don't tell me there's not!

The Psalmist had a cry of desire that God would vindicate Himself in activity. Look at verse 10 and 11: 'Lord, are You going to let these people blaspheme You forever?'. Oh, isn't it wonderful, there's a hope in this. My heart overflows with a great hope, because I believe - if we pray - that God's going to do it! Do you know why? Because there is always a hope that God will come and avenge His dishonoured name. There is always a hope that He will come when we cry: 'Lord, where is Your hand? Take it out of Your bosom, let's see You move amongst us, in our midst!', when we say to Him: 'Lord, it's going to go on like this unless You do something about it'.

My friend, whether we like it or not, I know that's not the way I pray. You might say: 'Is that too forward?'. No, it's not - the problem is: we are too backward! We are too backward with God. We need to say, as the poet:

'Why dost Thou from the conflict stay?
O Lord, why do Thy chariot wheels delay?
Lift up Thyself, hell's kingdom shake,
Arm of the Lord: Awake! Awake!'

'Pluck Your hand out of Your bosom, Lord! Work again amongst us, Lord!' - this is what we must have: fervent prayer. We need this, this isn't an option for some spiritual few - we need it! We need to say, as He said in verse 22 - look at this: 'Arise, O God, plead thine own cause'. In other words: 'Lord, in a day when

there's no-one to stand and fight Your cause, You're going to have to fight Your own!'. Oh, we need God to come through for us today. We need God to come and have a regard for His own glory. We need God to respect His own honour. We need God, again, to come - we need to argue God into action prayerfully and from a position of trust! As Chrysostom, the old church father, said: 'We need to argue the mercy from God!'

Remember the widow who wearied the unjust judge? She pestered him and went everywhere after him, and it annoyed him so much that he had to be pleased to give her what she wanted. Perhaps a better example would be the woman of Canaan, and how she came persistently, she nagged the Lord Jesus, she nagged the disciples. The disciples desired that she be dismissed, but the Lord knew what was in her heart. Let me tell you this, old Augustine said - and he was right: 'She argued mercy right into Christ's bosom'. Of course the mercy was there - of course, His bosom's full of mercy - but do you think He gives mercy out willy-nilly? It had to be a heart that was willing to plunge its spiritual hand into His bosom and get the mercy that was there!

Let me say: there's mercy with the Lord for us! There's blessing from the Lord for this place! There's blessing for your life, but you've got to get it! 'For from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force'. In other words this blessing that we are seeking, and we are going to seek, is like a garrisoned kingdom - and unless you're willing to climb the walls, unless you're willing to break through the bricks, you're not going to get it if you sit and watch television for the rest of your life, and go to glory happy.

The Psalmist found strength in knowing that God was a God of strength. Oh that I might leave you on this note as we finish: he told God what God had done. Do you think God needed reminded? Yes, He did! He needed reminded to know that His people hadn't forgotten who He was! He told them: 'Lord', verse 13, 'Thou divided the sea, Thou art the God of creation, Thou art the one who divided the Red Sea and delivered us from Egypt. We need deliverance from the world now, Lord, and You can do that! You are the God who came and could overcome leviathan, that great sea dinosaur, that sea creature. You're the one who could overwhelm what overwhelms man', that's what he's saying!

Oh, what overwhelms you? What overwhelms you? What sin overwhelms you? What habit overwhelms you? Is there just this lethargy - I've lived through this - this lethargy, that you can hardly pray, that you don't want to read the word of God? You find you're continually falling into the same temptation - God can overwhelm what overwhelms you! Verse 15: 'You broke open the fountains at creation and the flood'. Verse 17: 'You set all the borders' - what borders did God make? He separated day from night. He separated the sea from the land. He separated summer from winter, and autumn from spring. He even set national boundaries. Do you know what the word of God is saying? Whatever boundaries are limiting God in your life, He can smash them! Hallelujah! There is hope!

But there is no hope if we will not believe God to do it again. Some of us are going for it, will you be left behind?

Let us bow our heads to pray. Let me say this: this portion of Scripture has gone through my heart like a two-edged sword, and I have had to uncover sins in my life that I did not want to - and I'm still looking for victory to stay away from those things, and I'm hoping that I can take the grace of God that He will give me. I'm not reprimanding you, my friends, I'm putting myself in the same boat. I have had to re-dedicate my life afresh to Christ.

Now listen to me: I believe, and I believe it's more than me believe, that God wants blessing for this place. My friend, it's going to take more than a Sunday morning and evening. I'm going to ask you to do something that we don't normally do here, that is: if you are willing to covenant your prayers and your life for the prize

of blessing in Iron Hall, I want you to stand. No-one will be looking, all the eyes will be closed, and we will pray together. Please stand.

Father, Thou canst see our hearts. Lord, Thou knowest whether we honour Thee with our feet, and not with our hearts. Lord, even for those of us who are willing to be made willing, help us to be what Thou wouldst want us to be. Lord, I confess my sin, and we each confess our own sin - for if we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and make God a liar. So, Lord, receive this offering and help us in the future days to be ready for Thy blessing. In Christ's name, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - June 2001

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"A Refreshing Prayer"

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The passage of the word of God that we're turning to this morning is found in Isaiah's prophecy, Isaiah and chapter 64. Isaiah 64, this is the great reviving prayer of the word of God, of the prophet Isaiah. Let us read it as a prayer together, beginning at verse 1:

"Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence. As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence! When thou didst terrible things which we looked not for, thou camest down, the mountains flowed down at thy presence. For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him. Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned: in those is continuance, and we shall be saved. But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away. And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities. But now, O Lord, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand. Be not wroth very sore, O Lord, neither remember iniquity for ever: behold, see, we beseech thee, we are all thy people. Thy holy cities are a wilderness, Zion is a wilderness, Jerusalem a desolation. Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste. Wilt thou refrain thyself for these things, O Lord? Wilt thou hold thy peace, and afflict us very sore?"

Let us pray: Our Father, we come and bow in deep need before Thee as a people that are seeking Thee - some of us, perhaps, as we have never sought Thee before. We are coming to Thy word empty that Thou shouldst fill us. We are looking for a word from God. Lord, surely Thou wilt not leave us desolate, surely Thou wilt not deafen our ear to Thy voice. So we pray that, by the Spirit's still small voice, that Thou mayest speak to our hearts, that Thou mayest come down, that Thy presence may flow upon us in this very place this very day. Oh Lord, that Thy people may rejoice in Thee and glorify Thy name once more. Amen.

I've entitled my message: 'A Refreshing Prayer' - a refreshing prayer. This is a refreshing prayer simply because it is a prayer for refreshing. A prayer for refreshing is always a refreshing prayer, it is always refreshing to the one who prays it, it is refreshing to the one who listens to that prayer - but I would go as far as to say that it is refreshing to God. God is refreshed when He sees His people pray for the showers of blessing. What a blessing it must be to God to look down and to see within His church - beyond all the 'shopping list' praying, beyond the praying that says 'Bless Mummy and bless Daddy', beyond the prayers that plead God for the things that we want - what a blessing, what a refreshing it must be to God to see men and women who want to be real with Him! Men and women who have a heart thirsty for the living waters. Men and women who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Men and women who are coming to God and saying: 'As the deer panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee O God'.

What a blessing it is for God to see men and women following hard after Him. What a blessing it is for God to see this, to see men and women diligently seeking Him, because God loves it! God is the rewarder of them who diligently seek Him. Out of all the prayers of the Bible this is one we ought to look at to see how we ought to pray to God, and how we ought to seek God for His presence. The one theme throughout this whole prayer of Isaiah is this: the prophet evokes the past blessings of God in order to see God bless again in his

present day. In other words, he looks back at what God has done, and he lets it infuse his own soul and spirit to let him see with the eye of faith and foresight what God can do - the fact that God can do it again, only God can do better!

I say this categorically: throughout the word of God there was not a man or a woman who God used or lifted a finger with who did not have that prayer in their bosom. My friend, if you don't have a thirst after God to move in the Iron Hall, God will never use you - never! Old Gideon, when things were bad, and every man was doing that which was right in his own eyes, and there was no king in Israel, there was no leadership, there was no godliness - it says in Judges chapter 6 and verse 13: 'Gideon said unto God', he prayed a prayer like Isaiah's, 'Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites'.

Do you see his prayer? Do you see how similar it is to Isaiah's? He is invoking the past blessings of God and saying: 'If this is the God that is with us, why is His power not with us?'. It is the spirit of the Psalmist that we looked at a fortnight ago in Psalm 74: 'O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? Why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture? Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old; the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt... We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long'. 'The God that our fathers told us of seems to have cast us off!'.

Today some of us in this assembly pray and fast - do you know why? To see God bless us again! This passage speaks to many of us, do you know why? Because I believe God has put into our breast a deep aching, a deep dryness that nothing will satisfy - whether it be sin or self, and let me tell you I have tried to satisfy myself with both of those. I have tried the broken cisterns, but ah! the waters failed! You know this: as you stoop to drink, they flee and mock you! As you wail with that deep dry aching void that only the presence of God can refresh.

I ask you: is there not a need for refreshing? Oh, is there not a need for God to open the windows of heaven and pour a blessing out upon us here, now, this very day? Is there not a need for refreshing in your own heart? In the Iron Hall? In Northern Ireland? In the island of Ireland? In the whole of United Kingdom? Is there not a need for God to come down and God to bless us again? Do you not long to see it? Is your appetite not whet to see souls saved once again here, on a regular basis people weeping their way to the rugged cross? Is your appetite not whet to see young men and women following in Biblical paths, rather than following their academic career, and following pop groups and fashions and everything but God? Is there not an appetite to see our young being built up as the people of God? Is there not an appetite for you to see this district saturated with the power of God? Imagine! Drunken homes, adulterous homes, children that are growing up and haven't a hope - is there not a desire in your breast that God would break in and do what we seem to be powerless to do?

I have come to the conclusion that this will never happen through preaching the truth. That might sound heretical to you, but do you see when you're doing it for a little while? You begin to see that you are preaching the truth, you're preaching the truth to the lost, but they aren't saved. You're preaching the truth to the young people, but they have no desire for the prayer meeting, or for the Breaking of Bread, or for following hard after God. You preach the truth in the Open Air and there seems to be nothing happens at times. The reason being: preaching is not enough, because we need the presence of God in our lives! We need God to come, and He will only come when we seek Him.

Oh, this is an encouraging portion of Scripture - because I know, for me, it encourages me, it infuses me with faith to pray on and to believe that God can, and God will, bless us if we seek after Him. Just like Isaiah did,

if we come to God and plead and cry, and seek His face until He comes and until He avenges us - what a thrill to think that God will come if we truly seek Him! Oh, that encourages me, that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him, that He will avenge the cry of His elect that cry unto Him day and night without ceasing. 'Him that cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out', for 'If you call upon the name of the Lord, you shall be saved' - and that's not just salvation, for we need saved from the presence of sin here and now!

I want you to see how we ought to pray this day from Isaiah's prayer. The first thing is this: this was a prayer for God's presence, a prayer for God's presence. Verses 1 to 3, look at the very first word of this prayer: 'Oh!' 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens'. True praying is always characterised by that word: 'Oh', for it's the expression of longing, it's the expression of a deep thirst and desire after something that one has not got hitherto. It is the expression of a depraved - whether they be following after God or not - the expression of a depraved man at the end of his resources, who knows there is nothing in himself or of himself to help, there is nothing in himself that can overwhelm the power of the devil, and the power of the world, and temptation that has come into his life. It is the expression that this dark cloud that is coming over the people of God, he is helpless to do anything about it, so he cries at the end of himself: 'Oh God!'.

He is looking and longing after God. You see, that's what true praying is. You see in verse 7, the prophet says there is none that looketh or takes hold upon God: 'There is none that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee'. That is what praying is: taking hold upon God, laying hold upon Him! Not a half-hearted prayer! I vouch to say today: God does not hear cold-blooded prayers! He hears prayers that lay hold upon Him - prayers that are prayers of a full, broken heart after God!

Jacob, wrestling with that angelic figure, and that angelic figure told him: 'I must go', and Jacob said: 'I will not let thee go! You are not going anywhere until I am blessed!'. That might seem a bit far-fetched for us to say to God, but I believe that God wants us to say it to Him. I believe that God would want us to lay hold upon Him, that God should answer us in a peculiar way. He wants us to look to the past, like Isaiah did. He wants us to look to His mercies of old. In other words, in verse 1 what Isaiah really says, the tense is this: 'Oh that You had come down'. In other words, 'If You had been among us, and if You had come down, this all wouldn't have happened! If we had been seeking God the way we ought to be, none of this would happen!'.

His mere presence would have changed everything. In chapter 63 and verse 15 the prayer of the prophet is this: 'Look down'. Oh, he's just satisfied with God looking down. But, my friend, he moves from chapter 63 to 64, and he is no longer satisfied with God looking down, he wants God to come down! 'Oh that Thou wouldst come down'. Do you see the picture? Isn't it an awful picture? 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens'. Do you see it in your mind's eye? The heavens and the clouds being rent in a cleft, and the very foot of God stepping down into time! Imagine God opening heaven and coming down. Imagine God coming down and melting the mountains. The mountains speak to us of permanence, they've always been there, they were there before we were there and before our forefathers were. There they are, the spirit and the image of the ancients, the creation that has always been, but God comes and all that was permanent for us disappears!

'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens, that thou wouldest come down, that the mountains might flow down at thy presence. As when the melting fire burneth, the fire causeth the waters to boil, to make thy name known to thine adversaries, that the nations may tremble at thy presence!'. There is the picture of fire, the picture of fire just like in Exodus 19 when God gave them the law there on Mount Sinai. There was the thunder, there was the lightning, there was the smoke, there was the shaking of the earth - and let me tell you this: the people of Israel always looked back to that, because when they saw the power of God demonstrated to them all they could do when they were in spiritual backsliding was to look back.

'Lord, we remember when we saw Thee in fire, we saw Thee in thunder and earthquake and in lightning. We saw the pillar of fire and the cloud of smoke, we remember! We can look back and see when God's presence was among us, but Lord it's not here!'. So they looked back and they pleaded. Like the hymnwriter said: 'Oh rend the heavens, come quickly down, and make a thousand hearts Thine own'. Oh, is that not what we long for? Is that not what we long for in our families, that God would rend the heavens and come quickly down and make a thousand hearts His own? That's what's revival is, that's what an awakening is: when God comes down!

Like verse 2, when He comes like the boiling of water, that the nations would tremble like a kettle filled with water over 100 degrees centigrade, moving and shaken by the very presence of God! Oh, we know nothing of this. George Whitefield knew about it and in his journals, one day as he preached in the open air in Cheltenham, he wrote on Wednesday the 18th April - listen to this record: 'I preached this morning with power to a much larger congregation than we had last night. Several servants of God said they never saw the like before'. On another occasion he records: 'Suddenly God the Lord came down among us'. Oh, that we would see something that we have never seen the like before, and that God would come down among us.

Their memory recalls when God intervened, when God came to them. It's a good thing to remind ourselves, isn't it, of God's past interventions in the life and in the church of God - looking back at the Reformation, looking back at the great revivals, looking back at when God opened the windows of heaven and poured out a blessing literally, if you look at it, when they looked not for Him! This is when God came - they weren't looking for God, but God came and delivered them. They weren't looking for His presence, they weren't looking for His blessing, but yet He came and intervened.

In Egypt He sent the plagues to Pharaoh and all his house and all the nation, and God said: 'Let my people go!' - and they went! They came to the Red Sea and God intervened again. They didn't look for it, He intervened of His own free will - He opened up that sea and He delivered them right across. In the wilderness they're starving to death, and it is God who feeds them with the bread of heaven, with the manna come down from above, the angel food. They didn't look for it, but God came and God gave it to them. He gave them the water from the rock, He led them into the conquest of the promised land, and He defeated all their enemies and gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. Oh, how they are surprised - and that causes them to look back, and to look to God for another day like that when God would surprise them again!

Oh would you remind yourself today, as you fast and pray, of the power of God. Will you begin to pray as Isaiah did, realising the great power of God. What an encouragement it is to pray, but let me say this: we have a greater encouragement than Isaiah did! For when we look back we can see that when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth His Son made of a woman, made under the law. He couldn't look back to that, he couldn't look back to an old bloody cross where he could say:

'My sin, oh the bliss of this glorious thought,
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to His cross and I bear it no more.
Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, oh my soul!'

He couldn't say it. He couldn't look to an empty tomb and say: 'As He liveth, so we also shall live'. He couldn't look to a rent heaven at Pentecost, to a little number of believers in the Upper Room waiting and waiting and waiting until the promise of God from on high came, and they were empowered for service. But friends, we are post-Pentecost, we are post-resurrection, we are post-Calvary, and we can look back at it all and we can say to God upon the authority of His word: 'Lord, do it again! Rend the heavens again, as You rent it when you sent Your Son! Rend the heavens again, as You raised Him from the dead! Rend the heavens again, as You sent the Holy Ghost in power!'

Do you believe this? Do you believe that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds? You look all around you, look at the Labour government - what is their majority? 146, or something like that, and the house is 160? You see that, the majority that they have. You see what's going on in our land. You see what's happening in the church. I was talking to a believer yesterday, and do you know what they said to me? They were up at David Lloyd's gym in Dundonald, and his remarks to me were this: 'You know, I saw it, and I thought myself that's the way a church ought to be' - that's the way a church ought to be. We look at it all, don't we, and we think that's it - it's finished. But my friend, if you want to deny the word of God like that, that's fine - but God says the weapons of our warfare are mighty to the pulling down of strongholds. In other words we could pull down the Labour government if we put our minds to it! We can pull down anything, for the mountains melt at the presence of Almighty God! 'Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ!' Oh, what power there is!

There was a prayer for God's presence, and secondly there was a prize for those who waited on God. In verse 4, look: 'For since the beginning of the world men have not heard, nor perceived by the ear, neither hath the eye seen, O God, beside thee, what he hath prepared for him that waiteth for him'. Now, look, you remember what God did when they weren't looking for Him? Now Isaiah is saying: 'Look what God can do when people are looking for it!'. People who are seeking God - oh, what a thought, to 'look for'. That word 'wait' is the same word as 'look for' in verse 3 - 'we looked not for it'. It's the same sense as 'wait'. In other words, if we're going to wait on God that means we have to look for God. It means an expectation, literally 'to exercise a patient, confident and expectant faith'.

That is what God requires: expectant faith. He doesn't want a Christian sitting around waiting for the second coming, waiting for the Lord coming again! He wants a Christian looking for the Lord in his own life! Don't you forget that! The heaven and the earth will be dissolved with a fervent heat, oh, that's coming - and the rapture is coming, praise God for it. All these things are coming - but don't you forget, don't you cut out of the word of God what Peter said: 'Seeing all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of men ought we to be?'. The waxing worse and worse, and the great falling away and the apostasy, ought not to be in the heart of a believer - and you ought not to be satisfied with it!

Oh, but what a thought: if we look after God, if we seek after Him. You know, Paul quoted this verse, you know it in 1 Corinthians 2 and 9. Do you know how he quoted it? This is one of the most badly quoted verses in the whole of the word of God, he says: 'As it is written', looking back to Isaiah, 'Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him'. Now, that's not heaven. Heaven is part of it, but that's not what it means primarily - heaven. If anything it means the here and now, it means the Christian life, what God has prepared for us now! Verse 10 of this passage tells you that: 'But God hath revealed these things to us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God'. God has revealed to us - we have it now!

Isn't it astonishing: there's no limiting God. People say to me sometimes: 'Och, you're asking too much of God you know. You're aiming too high. Do you actually expect God to come as He did in the past, and do what He did, and people to come in contrition and in confession, weeping before God? Do you expect there to be a move?'. Yes! Do you know why? He is able to do exceeding abundantly more than I ask, or more than I even think, according to His riches and according to His power that works in us. Oh, John Newton, we sing him so much and we make liars of ourselves:

'Thou art coming to a King,
Large petitions with thee bring,
For His grace and power are such
You can never ask too much'.

We believe we can ask too much, don't we? There was a prize for those who waited on God, and there's the prayer for the presence of God. Thirdly there's a penalty for the people's sins. Verse 5 to 8, it's amazing, isn't it, that the request is that God come down to defeat their enemies, but when God does come down what happens is they begin to fall down in His presence, trembling and hiding because of their sin. That is what the problem is - their sin - in verse 5: 'Thou meetest him that rejoiceth and worketh righteousness, those that remember thee in thy ways: behold, thou art wroth; for we have sinned'. Sin! He says in verse 5 that God delights in those who live in practical righteousness, but the people were not living like that. They were not living holy lives and the wrath of God was incurred upon them. Verse 6, their sins are described - they're an unclean thing. Literally that's the word that's used in Leviticus where a leper was to cry when anybody came near him: 'Unclean! Unclean!'. Personal unfitness for fellowship with God.

Their righteousnesses, verse 6 says, are like filthy rags. Do you know what that literally is in the Hebrew? 'A garment of menstruation', a stained cloth with menstrual blood - and in Judaism anything to do with the reproductive system and procreation was seen and considered to be defiled. Do you know why? Because all human life is fallen. In other words, we are born in sin and shapen in iniquity, and the point that Isaiah is making is this: even our righteous acts flow out of our fallen nature! Even the good things that we do flow from our fallenness!

In verse 6 he says that we fade like a leaf, we're dead. Like a leaf in autumn that falls down, we have the name that we live but we are dead - and our sins blow us away like the wind. God abandons us to the consequences of our sin, and the penalty - what is the penalty of our sin? What is the penalty of my sin? It is the absence of God! Oh, that I would realise that. Verse 7 says: 'There is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee'. It's amazing - no-one seeking God, no-one stirring themselves, literally, rousing themselves. The idea is waking up from sleep. In other words, can I put it in the contemporary vernacular: nobody can be bothered!

You go to the young people: 'Oh, I'm too young, I'm getting on with my life. I haven't time for all that'. You go to the old people: 'I'm too old, I've seen enough blessing. I'm quite satisfied in my lifetime, I'm willing just to die peacefully without any upheaval of blessing'. You go to the middle aged, the young marrieds as well, and they say: 'I'm trying to rear a family. I'm trying to pay bills. I'm trying to please my boss. I don't have time'. So, if you go to the young, middle-aged, and old - who's going to seek after God? If the truth be told, there are times none of us can be bothered!

That is exactly what hides God's face from us, verse 7 says. It is our iniquity. God allows sin to take its course, and sin takes its course in death - and that is why some of us feel this deadness in our spiritual life, because God has let sin take its course! But I want to bring to you today a message of hope - and I need that message, because I'm exactly what I'm talking about here in this book. Don't think I've arrived, for I haven't - far from it! Verse 8 is the hope - oh, what a hope: 'But now, O Lord, thou art our father'. Isn't it wonderful that God is changeless? Although He is changeless in His requirements of us - in other words He requires holiness, He requires repentance - He is also changeless in His mercy and in His grace.

Do you know what Isaiah is saying? He is the potter, and you are the clay. He is the Father, and you are the children. Like Jeremiah 18, the potter and the clay - in other words, He has the power to change us. Oh, we sing:

'Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me.
Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me'.

Another of our hymns was written by A.A. Pollard:

'Have Thine own way, oh Lord, have Thine own way.
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mould me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting, yielded, and still.

Have Thine own way, oh Lord, have Thine own way.
Search me and try me, Master today.
Whiter than snow, Lord, wash me just now,
As in Thy presence humbly I bow.

Have Thine own way, oh Lord, have Thine own way.
Wounded and weary, help me I pray.
Power, all power, surely is Thine,
Touch me and heal me, Saviour divine.

Have Thine own way, oh Lord, have Thine own way.
Hold o'er my being absolute sway.
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see,
Christ only, always, living in me'.

Oh, there's a plea for God to avenge Himself fourthly - and that is because, in verses 9 to 12, God is implored not to be angry any more. 'Lord, don't be angry - for, Lord, You're also unchangeable in Your relationship to us. You are still our Father. You are still the potter, we are still Thy people'. The point is this: we are always in this state and, oh, that we would come to God as His own people. Oh, that we would look into His face as a child to a Father, and ask God that He'll lift us! Ask God that He'll have mercy! To ask the Potter that He'll mould us the way that He would want us to be!

In verse 10 and 11 he asked God to look down at the desolation of the temple, and the brokenness of Jerusalem, and everything that had been burnt with fire. God's place is a desert, it's desolate, and he's saying to Him: 'Things are in a bad way. God's house, where our founding fathers once sung Your praise as the church of God, is burnt to the ground'. Are you jealous for the glory of God? Are you jealous that the church once more would be a brilliant light, not a brilliant organisation? The church, in the last 50 years, has had brilliant organisation - and yet things decline more and more. They've had brilliant buildings, but things don't get any better. They've had brilliant preachers - but, my friend, what we need is the presence of God!

Will you be jealous for the glory of God? Will you repent as these people repented? They repented, they became right with God, they exposed their sin - and the wonderful thing about repentance is this: it works with God! When you wait for God, it works! When you work righteousness, it works! When you draw near to God, He draws near to you! When you seek Him with all your heart, you find Him!

I believe that if we truly seek the Lord, the Lord will leap into action and deal with the enemy, and create a new situation that transcends all the ruins of the past that we have known. He will do a new thing! I believe He will do it if we pray for His presence, if we wait on His prize, if we proclaim to Him our sin, and if we plead that He avenge Himself. We must pray today, rejoicing in the God that we have, for a touch of power from heaven to be among us. Oh that Thou wouldst rend the heavens. Oh, that Thou wouldst come down, that the mountains might flow down at Thy presence.

As we close, don't forget that after this service - straight after - there'll be some folk coming upstairs. You can stay for as long as you can, but there'll be folk here all afternoon seeking God's face, and praying to Him: 'Oh that thou wouldest rend the heavens'.

Oh, that Thou wouldest rend the heavens. Oh, that Thou wouldest come down, and make a thousand hearts Thy home. Lord, You did it at Pentecost. Because You've given the Spirit once and for all to the church, we appeal to Thee, our Father, to fill us - and if it takes it, to break us and melt us and mould us - but Lord, whatever You do, fill us and come down. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - June 2001

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"What Is Our Fuel: Feeling Or Faith?"

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We're reading from God's holy word, from Genesis and chapter 22. Genesis chapter 22 and we're beginning at verse 1: "And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt", or it could better be translated 'test', "Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went into the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you. And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together. And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together. And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son. And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me. And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son. And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovahjireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen". Amen.

Now let's come before the Lord in just a short word of prayer before we come to His word, let us pray. Our Father, we come before You this morning in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and we say with the hymnwriter of old, our Father: To make our weak heart strong and brave - send the fire. To live a dying world to save - send the fire. Oh see us on Thy altar lay, our lives, our all this very day. To crown the offering now we pray, Lord - send the fire. Meet with us we pray dear God. In Jesus name. Amen.

I want you to turn with me to the passage that we read together this morning from Genesis chapter 22. I don't know whether you read the newspaper during the week but I would encourage you to read them, and read the right ones. But when we're reading them, we notice this week that there has been a story about a book that has come out about Lady Diana. The book is entitled: 'Faking it'. It has a number of articles in it about people whom the writer, a philosopher, seems to believe has added to a society in Britain today which is nothing but sentimental. In yesterday's Daily Mail there was this headline: 'Cry-Baby Britain'. The writer wrote: 'A brilliant professor of philosophy blames Diana for Britain becoming a nation of self-indulgent sentimentalists in which feelings' - now listen to this - 'in which feelings come before duty'. He suggests that we have become a nation where feelings are more important than duty.

Again in the Daily Mail, this time in the same article only a day before, about this book, about Princess Diana, there was an article written about religion in Britain. The writer wrote this, he summed religion up by saying this, that it's made up of 'bearded vicars in woolly pullovers, touchy feely services, vacuous sing songs', he said, 'were the symptoms of the victory of sentimentality over the doctrines of religion'. The co-editor of this book, the Reverend Peter Mullen, says that the encounters of old with a terrifying Almighty

God have been replaced by blasphemous shams, designed to give the congregations the same buzz as Prozac without the need to turn out on a wet night. He went on to say, 'What goes on in our churches today is not religion', the Anglican clergyman claimed, 'the reality, the purpose and the glory of it all have long since departed'. Even the world, brethren this morning, are noticing that our nation has become a nation that is absorbed with sentimentality. We saw it when Diana died, didn't we? We saw thousands, yea millions of people all over the country mourning for this woman - and that was not wrong, but it seemed to me and it seemed to many, and it even seems to those in the world (who, at times, can be wiser than those in the church), it seemed that there was a confusion of emotion. People were expressing religious feelings and emotions but they had nothing to anchor them in, they had no sure foundation for their faith.

I want to suggest to us this morning, that so often we as the church can imbibe the philosophy of the world. Leonard Ravenhill coined a phrase, he said this: 'As the church goes, so goes the world'. And what he meant by that was this, that whenever the church is on fire for God, whenever the church is really lit for God, it will turn the world upside-down. In other words it's like a thermostat that determines the temperature of the world. And when we have a church that is on fire, just like the Apostles of old, it is claimed that we turn the world upside-down. But yet on the other side of the coin the antithesis is true, that when the church is lukewarm, when the church is apathetic, when the church is becoming more like the world, we have a lessening effect on the world around us.

I've entitled my message this morning, and I believe that it is the message that God has put upon my heart: What is our fuel? F-u-e-l. What is our fuel? Is our fuel in our feeling, or is our fuel in faith? I want to begin this morning by looking at our dilemma of feeling. Our dilemma of feeling. We have become - whether we realize it or not, and I have realized it - I have become more and more sentimental in my spirituality. Much of my spiritual walk, as I go from day to day, and week to week, is becoming more and more self-centred. I can even see it in the songs that I like singing best. Some of the newer songs that we see today - now they're all not wrong, many of them are great - but we notice in some of them a continual self-centeredness. We find that 'I', 'me', 'my' seems to come up more than 'Thou', 'Thee' and 'You, O God'. Some of the songs and some of the choruses that arising today are choruses and songs that could be sung to a boyfriend or a girlfriend as well as our Lord. Now more than ever, the atmosphere of a meeting, the feeling of a meeting, the buzz of a meeting seems to be what is of primary importance - and whether we realize it or not, some of us, and I myself, have begun to live a life on feelings.

Can I ask you this morning, each of you, what is your spiritual life like? I don't know about you - I'd love to get you to put your hand up and admit to this - but I will freely admit to it: that my spiritual life, so often, is like a graph of peaks and troughs. Is that not true? It goes up and down and we're on the mountaintop one day and we can be in the valley the next day. Things can go well, we can be having our quiet times for perhaps two weeks, and then suddenly we fall and we maybe don't have it for another two weeks. Now it seems that my life, and I'll admit it, can be a series of peaks and troughs.

Do you remember the day you got saved? The first day when the Lord Jesus Christ came to you by His Spirit and He came into your heart, He came into your life, and He changed your life for good. Do you remember the buzz that you felt? Do you remember the joy that you had because you had met Christ, because you were now a Christian? You were a changed person, and you were like that for perhaps a couple of weeks or months. But I'm sure, if you're here this morning and you've been saved for a little while, you have lost the feeling of when you were first saved. You've lost the passion, perhaps, you've lost the enthusiasm and the zeal that you had right in the beginning. Some days you're alright, some days you're on the mountaintop, everything's going well, you enjoy your prayer time, you are able, you feel, to witness to your friends in work, you feel that everything is alright. But it seems that those experiences on the mountaintop are few and far between, and those in the valley, those of dryness, those of dearth, those of a seeming lack of spirituality become more and more as we go along our Christian life. And if we're honest with ourselves this morning -

and I think, more than ever today, that Christians need to be honest with one another - if we are honest with ourselves, we many times have to force ourselves to pray. We have to force ourselves to read the word of God - it is a chore for us, it is a dearth, it's like walking in quicksand at times - we have to force ourselves to say a word to our loved ones about the Lord Jesus Christ. And many times we do it and there is no feeling in it at all. But, if we are honest, most of the time we don't even do it. We don't pray because we don't feel like praying. We don't read God's word because we don't feel like it. We don't feel like saying to someone that the Lord died for them and that He can save them if they will. And what we do is, as Christians - and I've had to look at myself through the mirror of God's word this week - as Christians do you know what we do? We try to maintain that joy in our lives, we try to work that joy up in our lives. We do the things that we like, to try and infuse into our spiritual walk, our spiritual discipleship, some joy that we feel is so, so missing. But time and time again we lose it! Is that not your dilemma this morning? That is my dilemma of feelings.

I want you to see, this morning, the Bible's demonstrations of faith. Quickly turn with me to Genesis chapter 22, and we see here the Bible's demonstration of faith. Now if you know your Bible this morning, you'll know that throughout the book of Genesis we have the life of Abraham. And here in Genesis chapter 22 we see Abraham and Isaac, and God came to Abraham and He says: 'Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac'. And He basically told him to go, take him to Mount Moriah and sacrifice his only son for God. In this chapter Abraham did it. But, if you like, this chapter is the pinnacle of Abraham's faith, the pinnacle of Abraham's walk with God. This, if you like, was where Abraham, in some measure, had reached spiritual maturity and mature faith. Because if we go back a few chapters and we go to chapter 15, we see Abraham here in a different light. We see in chapter 15 and verse 18 that God promised Abraham something - He said to Abraham, in chapter 15 and verse 18: 'In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying unto him, thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, Euphrates'. He said, 'Abraham, I have given your son, your seed, this land'. Now, Abraham was an old man now, his wife was an old woman now - and we see, in chapter 16, that his wife Sarah began to get worried and it was going through her mind, 'I'm an old woman, I'm too old to have a child. God is promising these things, but can God deliver these things? I'm an old woman'. And because of that she became impatient, and Abraham with her became impatient, and in chapter 16 and verse 3 we see this: 'And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife'. Sarah gave Hagar, her servant, to her husband so that a child and children would be raised up to Abraham in order to facilitate, as she saw it, the promise that God gave. As far as she was concerned she was too old. We see it again in chapter 18 and verse 9, these angels came to the both of them in verse 9: 'And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'. And she laughed at the suggestion that she could have a child in her old age - she had forgotten the promise of God, she forgot that nothing was impossible with Him.

Now I want you to see this, in this first instance that we read about, when Hagar was given to Abraham by Sarah to bear a child, why was it? God had said, 'Listen, I will raise up a seed for you Abraham'. But why did Sarah panic? Do you know why? She felt that God wasn't going to do it. She felt that He couldn't do it, she felt old, she felt unable to bear a child and because of her feelings it brought unbelief. Why did she laugh when the angel came and said to Abraham, 'Sarah, lo Sarah thy wife shall bear a son' - and she was heard to laugh. Why? Because she felt it was impossible, she felt she was too old.

We see it again in the walk of Abraham's life, for in chapter 20 we see another milestone in his walk of faith. And we see that he went unto King Abimelech, you remember, and he had Sarah with him and Sarah was a very beautiful person. And he was worried, he felt worried, he felt fear that Abimelech would see this

woman, how beautiful she was, and he would kill Abraham and take Sarah for his wife. So what did he say? He said, 'Sarah is my sister'. And when he told him that, then Abimelech thought he was free to marry Sarah. But God showed Abimelech in a dream that this wasn't so. But why did Abraham lie? Why did he lie? Why did he not believe God? It was this: because he felt Abimelech was going to take his wife off him by killing him. He felt.

We can go further, I could take you from many scriptures this morning - Cain and Abel. Why did Cain offer a bad sacrifice to the Lord? Why did he take of the fruit of the ground and give it to God? Because he felt that the labour of his hands was to be acceptable in the sight of God. Perhaps Abel didn't feel great about bringing his lamb to die and shed its blood for the sacrifice, but that was what God said. It didn't matter what Cain felt.

I could take you to Job this morning. I could take you to a man who had his children taken away, who had his family taken away, who had his cattle, his wealth, his health taken away. Can you imagine how Job would feel? Try and imagine. But what Job was able to do was, he was able to take his feelings and set them aside and he was able to say, 'Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him'.

But I want to take you to a more important person this morning, in Mark chapter 14, and that's my Lord. Mark chapter 14 - and we're in the Garden of Gethsemane, and let's think about that as we come to the Lord's table this morning. We're in the Garden of Gethsemane and the Lord is in prayer, He is in agony as He looks upon the sins of the world that He will have to bear and it says that He was exceeding sorrowful even unto death, in verse 34. Now I want you to see this: the Lord Jesus Christ who knew no sin, who did no sin and could not sin, He is in the garden and He is looking upon the sins of the world. He is near to death, He is sweating as it were great drops of blood and He says, in verse 36: 'Abba Father, all things are possible unto Thee, take away this cup from Me'. He saw your sin, He saw my sin, and Hebrews chapter 5 and verses 7 and 8 show that He feared - the Lord Jesus Christ saw all this and He feared. And His feelings drove Him to say, 'If it is possible let this cup pass from Me, if there is another way whereby sins could be atoned, take it away!'. But do you know what He did? He was perfect and He let faith override those feelings. Because He said, 'But nevertheless, not My will but Thine be done' - and in Hebrews chapter 5 it says: 'And by this He learned obedience through His sufferings'. Through His sufferings He was able to set the feelings aside and go in faith.

Now here's what I want to leave you with this morning. We've looked at our dilemma of feelings and we have looked at the Bible's demonstration of faith, but look at this: this is our duty, to have faith. Do you know what our mistake is, and my mistake? We make the mistake that joyous feeling equals spiritual stature. We make the mistake to think that happiness equals spirituality, that we should be jumping for joy every minute of the day. We think that that is spiritual joy and therefore we think the antithesis again, that dryness and spiritual sterility means that we are not spiritual whatsoever. It's like finding a piece of jewellery. Women, you've lost your engagement ring, you can't find it anywhere and you sweep everywhere, and you look up and down, and you move everything, and then you find it and you're jumping for joy. And that's like the moment we get saved, we've found something that we've never had. But as the week goes on, and as the months go on, you still have your ring on your finger, but the joy of finding it initially has gone. And that's the same with our salvation, we know that it is still there - but the joy seems to go. It's like the little child that looked out the window one day, on a rainy day, and he said, 'Daddy where's the sun gone?', and he ran up the stairs and looked out the top window and he couldn't find it. And the father took him up on his knee and he said to him, 'Now, son you can't see the sun, but the sun is there, the clouds are blocking the sun out'. Do you know what the clouds can be in our lives as Christians? Our feelings. And if we live a life based on feelings our sky will always be cloudy, they will cover over in darkness. But we ought not to live on feelings, and if we don't live on feelings then our sky, our faith, will know no change whatsoever.

Let me ask you, why do you read your Bible? Do you read your Bible when it's tasteful to you? It's very easy to read your Bible, isn't it, after the meeting? It's very easy to read your Bible after a prayer meeting, or after you've listened to a rapturous song and singing - and so often we think that in those moments, when we do those things, we are the most spiritual, but do you know what the reality is? We are doing these things upon the influence and the fuel of our feelings. That's what happened when you first got saved, you were living on the joy of being saved, right away you'd found something you'd never found before. But do you know what's happening? God is wanting in your life to bring spiritual maturity. God is actually bringing into your life these periods of dryness. Because He wants you, this morning, not to live on your feelings, not to read the word when it just feels good, not to pray when you feel like it - because in those moments you are the most fleshy. But God wants to, as it were, knock from under our shoulder any crutch that we have. He wants us to throw away the crutch of feelings this morning and He wants us to hold unto Him no matter what. God's motive is very simple.

You see we usually look for joy in the Christian life - and let's be honest, this shows me up to be somewhat of what I am - we look for joy in the Christian life, why? For number one. We are even sensual - think about it! - we're sensual in our Christian life, we want to sense everything and feel everything. But God is saying here, He's saying to Abraham, 'If all of these things are gone...' - think of him, as he is about to offer his son, the feelings that are going through his mind, 'My only son' - but he set the feelings aside and he obeyed God in faith. This is the secret of what I'm getting at this morning. God wants to train your will power and my will power - you don't hear that too much these days. God wants to train our will power. It's like the boat, the sailing boat, that is going along in the river and the gust of wind comes and the sailing boat goes, but then when the wind stops the sailing boat stops. And you would look funny on those sailors, if they sat in the boat and there were oars on the boat and they sat there doing nothing. But do you know what? Their strength is increased when they row - and what God is saying here is, He gives us feelings at the start of our Christian experience to keep us on the way. He gives us those little mountaintop experiences, but He is saying - listen - we really grow in the Lord, when He leaves us with the help of His Spirit to by our will power, follow Him wholly. And when we do that it means that no matter what environment He puts us in, no matter what place we find ourselves in, no matter what crutches are taken away, if we don't have any crutches, do you know what happens? We rejoice in the Lord, and what happens is our feelings and our faith run together like two rivers and go into one, do you know why? I hope you're not getting me wrong today, but God help us from a dead fundamentalist faith. Christianity without feeling is not Christianity. But what I'm getting at this morning is this: that our faith should determine our feelings, not vice versa. And when we do that, the feelings and the faith run together and they become one.

Think, just for one moment as we close, on Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. They would not bow down when the trumpets blew, when the psaltry played, when everything went and everybody in the nation bowed down to that god, that idol, they said: 'We will not bow down'. Nebuchadnezzar said, 'If you don't bow down you're going into that furnace'. Do you know what they said? 'Let it be so. For our God is able to deliver us. He is able' - but listen to what they said - 'He is able, but even if He doesn't we will trust in Him'. Now listen, if they had just said, 'Our God is able to deliver us', and they knew He was going to deliver [them], that wouldn't have been as much faith. Do you know why? Because they would have been living on the feeling of anticipation of being freed. But the real faith came when they knew that, even if He didn't free them, they would have faith in Him. If God was to take away from you today the things that make you feel good, what would you have? May we say with Mary Carmichael:

'Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay,
The hope no disappointments tire,
The passion that will burn like fire.

Let me not sink to be a clod,
Make me Thy fuel, O flame of God'.

The great old Presbyterians paraphrased the 46th Psalm and they went like this, listen to this as we close: 'God is our refuge, and our strength. In straits of present fear therefore although the earth remove we will not be afraid'. And the prophet Habakkuk summed it up by saying this in chapter 3 and verse 17 - listen, the hymn of faith - listen: 'Although the fig tree shall not blossom', think about that, farmer, the fig tree does not blossom, 'neither shall be fruit in the vines, the labour of the olive tree fail and the fields shall yield no meat, the flock shall be cut off from the fold and there shall be no herd in the stalls'. Listen, if my world around me falls in and I feel awful: 'Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, the God of my salvation, the Lord is my strength' - not my feelings - 'the Lord is my strength, and He will make my feet like hinds feet, and He will make me walk upon mine high places'.

Is that your experience? Is it the peaks and the troughs? Or do you walk by faith and not by sight?

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"The Cry from Hell"

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I want to preach to you this morning on the subject "The Cry from Hell". We're turning to Luke chapter 16, Luke chapter 16 - the very well known passage that is often preached as a gospel message. The story about the rich man and Lazarus. I've been seeking the Lord in the last week, as is my custom, for the message that He wants me to bring today, and I feel, very much, this message burning upon my heart. Luke 16 and verse 19:

"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores. And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Let's bow in a moments prayer, as we seek God's blessing: Lord, we have been singing, and we make it our prayer, 'Jesus fill now with thy Spirit, hearts that full surrender know, that the streams of living water from our inner men may flow.' Lord, we pray, breathe Thy breath upon us, come and meet with us and speak by Thy Holy Spirit we implore Thee, oh our God. In Jesus name, Amen.

The two verses that I want to take as my text this morning are verse 27 and 28, "Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment".

The cry of hell. Not all of you this morning will hear that cry. Not all believers hear the cry from hell. We read within the word of God about faith. The word of God says that without faith it is impossible to please God. And often when we hear the word of God preached, preachers often talk about the 'eye of faith'. That simply is an expression to describe how we in our minds eye, trusting that the word of God is true, can see forward into time and talk and think about the things that are written within the word of God. How we from our hearts, and if I can say this, even imagine the things that will come to pass and even the things that are in the realms of glory, that we cannot see with the naked eye. We know the Lord Jesus Christ by the eye of faith, don't we? "Him having not seen, yet we love", we have never seen the physical shape and body of the Lord, we have never touched him, yet we know Him, perhaps - or we ought to know Him - more intimately than those that we know best down here on earth.

There is the eye of faith. But what I want to talk to you this morning about is not the eye of faith but the 'ear of faith'. Not the ability to see things that are eternal, to see things that are biblical, that the Lord has spoken

of, that have been, that are, that will be to come. But the ability to have your ear put to the ground of God's eternity and be able to hear the cry of hell.

Can you hear it? That ear of faith needs to be cultivated. It is cultivated through the word of God, reading the word of God we hear the cry from hell -- but if, my friend, you are not reading the word of God, you will never hear that cry! That ear of faith is cultivated through prayer and through meditation upon the word of God, through studying it, through thinking of the implications of what our blessed Lord Jesus Christ says, claims and teaches. The Lord Himself said in Matthew 11:15, "He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear".

I know that not all of you will hear that cry this morning, but I pray that one or two will hear it. Maybe some of you hear it already -- do you hear what the cry from hell is? Christian friend, I believe that the battle today in Christianity, one of the great battles, is the battle for the heart. Solomon says in Proverbs 4:23, "Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life". Your heart is the seat of affections, it is the place where your feelings are felt, where the ear of faith beats, where it hears, where the drum is of that hearing. It is the place where the eyeball and pupil of the eye of faith can be seen -- there is the place where you feel your Christianity -- in the heart!

Can I ask you, do you feel your Christianity? Oh, I know that some of you, the heckles are up now -- 'feeling your Christianity'? Now listen, I know that our Christian faith is not a belief that is feelings-based. But let me say this: that our Christianity ought not to be feeling-less. There is a grave difference, and God deliver us from a feeling-less Christianity that is cold, that is unmoved, that has no heart, that cannot be touched. If Christ is touched with the feelings of our infirmities, ought we not to be touched so with those of our brothers and sisters and those in humanity who are damned? Do you remember what the prophet said? Ezekiel 36:26, "A new heart also will I give you, a new spirit will I put within you. And I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh". And God the Spirit was changing and telling the Jews, 'Your religion is now to turn from being religion of the head, to a religion of the heart'. A religion of rules, to a religion of reality! Do you know that? Can you feel your Christianity my friend? Now I know when you get saved you base it upon fact -- Christ died for me, I have put my trust in Him and His word tells me that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. There is the Scriptures; then there is fact about what the Scriptures say; and then comes, and my friend must come, feeling. You've got to have it.

Do you feel for the lost? Do you feel, do you hear, do you see their torment? I know you've heard about the story of the young boy, Burns, as he was walking down the street in Scotland, hand-in-hand with his mother. And as she was looking in the shop window, you heard him say, "Mother, mother can't you hear the tramp, tramp of Christless feet into eternity?". He had the ear of faith. Do you have it? In Isaiah 66 and verse 8, Isaiah makes this account, "As soon as Zion travailed she brought forth her children". And only a heart that is soft, only a heart that is breaking, only a heart that is after God's own heart can hear the cry from hell.

What is it? Is it 'Lord, be merciful onto me a sinner'? Is the cry, 'Lord, forgive me'? Is the cry a sound of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth? Is it a cry of worldly, sinful men and women cursing God to His face in God's hell? Is it the intellectual, questioning the justice and the fairness of Almighty God for them to be in such a place? No! It's not. It is not the cry of repentance, it is not the cry of penitence, it is not any of these cries of torment, although some of them may be there. The cry that we hear before us today can be summed up in two words, in verse 27, verse 28: "Send!", "Send!, Lest!".

Read those verses again, "Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment". It's amazing isn't it? That the cry from hell is exactly the same as the cry from heaven. Isn't that amazing? "Send!", "Send!", "Whatever you do Abraham, if you can't bring that water to my tongue, if you

can't send Lazarus across the great gap, I know the realities of hell too much to know that now I am damned and I cannot be saved, but whatever you do Abraham: send somebody home!".

God sends us. Do you remember what He told Isaiah? In Isaiah 6, when Isaiah was touched by his sinfulness, his inability before God, and God said, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?". The triune Godhead it is His clarion cry, "Send!". It is the cry of Jesus Christ to His disciples as He ascended to heaven to His Father again, He said, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost". But does it not stagger you, that it's the cry of the triune Godhead, it is the cry of the Lord Jesus Christ after His crucifixion for the sins of men and women of this world, but it is also the cry of the damned. "Send somebody home! Send someone to my five brothers, to my sister, my mother, my father, my child -- send them - so that they won't come to this place!".

Silence is often said to be a sin, when we do not tell others about the Lord Jesus Christ and when we're walking along life's pathway, whether in work -- whatever we do, outside, inside -- when we do not speak a word for Christ, when we have an opportunity, and that is so. But the sin of silence is not the only sin -- there is the sin of deafness. Deafness to the groans of a damned soul. Deafened by materialism, deafened by selfishness, deafened by worldliness, by neglect of the means of hearing, word and prayer and fellowship. But oh, however it has come, there is a deafness within our souls to that cry from hell, that we will go and send someone to save.

I wonder is there anyone here that wants to hear that cry. If you do there's three things that you're going to need. The first thing is: you will need compassion. That simply means that you will need to feel as the Saviour felt. See, when you look at the lost and you see them -- do you see them as the Saviour did, as sheep without a shepherd? Do you look at them like He did in Matthew 23:37, "Oh, Jerusalem", can you see the tears tripping Him? "Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets and stonest them which are sent unto thee. How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings and ye would not". Do you feel like that at times? Are you moved, are you touched by their waywardness, by their sinfulness, by the disease of sin that is in them destroying their life and destroying their eternity? Does it move you to tears? Does it move your heart?

We have compassion on a drowning child, don't we? And we can watch, and we can see it in trouble, and we can't do anything about it, perhaps. And we're watching, and as the head goes below the water time after time, and again, and then it ceases to come up and it goes down for good," and it drowns. And then we see at the funeral a little casket, small, dainty, pathetic. And we weep. But my friend, do we have compassion enough to hear the cry from hell? Which is a greater cry! Which is a greater plea! "Send someone, whatever you do -- you have a chance, you're on Earth now, you have years before you to live -- will you do something!" That's what they are all saying now, on Lord's Day morning in hell, if you could put a megaphone in that's what you would hear! "Send, send!".

You need compassion, but secondly you need travail. We don't hear too much about this today. We find it in the person of Paul the Romans chapter 9, if you want to turn to it. Romans 9 and verse 2 and 3, where he says this, concerning his kinsmen according to the flesh within his own society of the nation of Israel. He says, "I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart, for I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh". Do you see what he is saying? 'I almost wish that I could be damned, that I could take their place, that I could go to hell and they could be set free, in order that they might be saved'. We need to travail like Jacob, until we prevail with God. We wrestle with Him, wrestle before Him, until we have a name like his name, that says that we are a prince, because we prevail with God and we prevail with men.

I read recently the biography of 'Praying Hyde'. Some of you may have heard this story before. But Praying Hyde was on the mission field and he stayed on the mission field until he could do no more, through health. He was sent back home and he was sent to the doctors. When he went into the doctors, the doctor examined him, sent him away, and then he came back to get the results of what was wrong with him. The doctor sat him down and he said, "Mr Hyde, do you have any pains in your heart?" He said "Yes I do". He says, "Mr Hyde, your heart has displaced itself. Your heart ought to be here, but it has moved over in the cavity of your chest, and that can only happen through one thing -- agony." He was called 'the apostle of prayer' and his prayers led to thousands being taken into the kingdom of God, into the church of Jesus Christ in the land of India. But he was a man that travailed. He was a man that lost his health for God.

Do you know what the cry is today? A 'save-yourself Christianity'. Whatever you do, don't harm yourself. Be careful. Watch that you don't overdo it. Don't become too fanatical. But my friend, if you've heard the voice from hell, you know what the Lord Jesus Christ meant when He said, "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it, and whosoever will lose his life for my sake will save it". Have you lost your life for Christ? You know this is the irony of the Scriptures, and we find it right throughout the word of God; that He turns the ideals and the philosophies of the world upside-down. If you run around in this life trying to get as much yourself, make as much for your name, and do everything down here; the reality is eternally speaking that you will lose everything. And if you lose everything down here, your reputation, your name, your bank balance, whatever God calls you to lose -- if you lose it, you'll save it up there!

It's still pains me that I don't feel the cry from hell enough. And I remember talking to an evangelist friend of mine and saying, "I know this verse, that them that weep, them that travail in tears shall bring their sheaves back with them in joy". I said to him, "How can I weep for souls? I don't want them to be crocodile tears, I don't want to work something up within my soul that's not real. How can I weep for souls? I don't want to be weeping for a dead loved one and pretend that I'm weeping for souls". Do you know what he said? "David, when Jesus Christ the Son of God weeps in you for souls, you will weep". When Jesus indwelling us, the hope of glory, the indwelling Christ begins to move, begins to weep for souls by His Spirit within us. That is the philosophy of prayer, isn't it? That He puts within us the desires of His heart, that He might bring them to a reality in our lives.

Can a child be born without pain? You know it's the same thing in the spiritual as in the natural, that's why Paul said in Galatians 4:19, "My children, my children of whom I travail in birth pangs again until Christ be formed in you". Do you have compassion? Do you travail?

The first message from hell was this: "Send!". The second message is this: "Lest!". And there are two things that I want to say with regard to this little word: "Lest". "Lest" speaks of consequences: "Lest they come to this place of torment". It speaks to me, as I read that verse, as a preacher of the Gospel, as a Christian, it speaks to me of Ezekiel 33 -- and you can turn to it now. Ezekiel 33 and verse 8, and you will see there God's prophet speaking of the watchman. The watchman was to stand on his turret, and he was to look across the horizon, and whenever he heard the tramp, tramp of the horses hooves, or he heard the trump of battle of the enemy, he was to shout a warning, he was to put his trumpet to his mouth and blow and warn them of the judgement that was to come. God told Ezekiel, "Listen my boy, if you don't warn them, I will require their blood at thy hand". Then you get these clever-clogs that come and say, "Oh, but that was the Old Testament, that's not applicable now". If you look to Paul in Acts chapter 18 and verse 6, he preached the Gospel and it says, "and when they opposed themselves and blasphemed", it says, "Paul shook his raiment and said unto them 'Your blood be upon your own heads, I am clean. From henceforth I will go onto the Gentiles'".

Paul believed it -- do we have blood upon our hands? Do we? Do we put the trumpet to our mouth and cry? Do we feel like Paul, "Woe is onto me if I preach not the Gospel"? I read an atheist once who said this, "You Christians -- you see if I believed what you believe about hell, I would crawl on my hands and my knees

across broken glass to the four corners of the world to warn people of it". I read a poem once, that spoke of the consequences for you, if you don't tell people that they need Christ, it's called "My Friend":

"My friend I stand in the judgement now,
And feel that you're to blame somehow.
On earth I walked with you day by day,
And never did you point the way.

You knew the Lord of truth and glory,
But never did you tell the story.
My knowledge then was very dim,
You could have led me safe to Him.

Though we lived together on this earth,
You never told of the second birth.
And now I stand this day, condemned,
Because you failed to mention Him.

You taught me many things, it's true,
I called you 'friend' and trusted you.
But I've learned now that it's too late,
You could have kept me from this fate.

We walked by day and talked by night,
And yet you showed me not the light.
You let me live, and love, and die,
And knew I'd never live on high.

Yes, I called you 'friend' in life,
And trusted you through joy and strife.
And yet on coming to the end,
I cannot now call you 'my friend'."

There are consequences for us and there are consequences for them. Can you hear their cry my friend, this morning, can you hear it? "Send someone, please send someone! Lest my loved ones, my children, my countrymen -- Lest they come onto this torment!". You know, this is the cry of God's heart. And if I am to be faithful to God's word, I will preach this message until you feel that cry in your bosom. Did you know when you tune a stringed instrument, two stringed instruments - one's in tune and you tune the other to it. And you pluck a certain note on that stringed instrument, without touching the other it will resound and echo the same note in unison. If you hear the cry of hell in your heart today, you will hear it because it's in the heart of God.

I want to finish today, by reading an account from Amy Carmichael, she was a missionary in India. She writes this of her experience one night, and I'm quoting it. In a village of India, Amy Wilson Carmichael wrote:

"I could not go asleep. So I lay awake and looked; and I saw, as it seemed, this: that I stood on a grassy sward and at my feet a precipice broke sheer down into infinite space. Back I drew dizzy at the depth. Then I saw people moving single file along the grass. They were making for the edge. There was a woman with a baby in her arms and another little child holding onto her dress, and she was on the very verge. Then I saw that she was blind. She lifted her foot for the next step - it trod air. Oh, the cry as they went over!

Then I saw more streams of people from all parts. They were blind, stone-blind; all made straight for the precipice edge. There were shrieks as they suddenly knew themselves falling, and a tossing up of helpless arms, clutching at empty air. Then I saw that along the edge there were sentries set at intervals. But the intervals were far too great; they were wide, there were unguarded gaps between. And over these gaps the people fell in their blindness, quite unwarned, and the gulf yawned like the mouth of hell.

Then I saw, like a little picture of peace, a group of people under some trees, with their back to the gulf. They were making daisy-chains. There was another group. It was made up of people whose great desire was to get more sentries; but they found that very few wanted to go.

Once a girl stood alone in her place, waving the people back; but her mother and other relatives called, and reminded her that her furlough was due. Being tired and needing a change she had to go and rest for a while; but no one was sent to guard her gap, and over and over the people fell, like a waterfall of souls.

Once a child caught a tuft of grass that grew on the very brink of the gulf; it clung convulsively and it called, but nobody seemed to hear. Then the roots of grass gave way, and with a cry the child went over. And the girl who longed to be back in the gap thought she heard the little one cry and she sprang up and wanted to go, at which they reproved her; then they sang a hymn. Then through the hymn, the pain of a million broken hearts rung out in one full drop, one sob. It was the Cry of Blood."

"Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment."

Our Father, we thank Thee that we know that Thy heart, is a missionary heart. For the Father sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Lord may our hearts-strings resound in sweet melody to Thy heart, that we may go and seek the lost, rescue the perishing, care for the dying -- and tell them of Jesus, the mighty to save. Lord, do business with our hearts today and speak as we cease to speak. And take us to our homes with Thy blessing now, in Jesus name, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - April 2000

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"Courage For The Unknown Road"

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Joshua chapter 3 again, and as I was thinking about the message this morning, and realising that we have taken a short break over Christmas time from our studies in the book of Philippians, I was seeking the Lord's guidance as to what to bring to you today - whether to bring a message on the new year, or whether to just launch back into our letter of Philippians. I felt the Lord very forcibly giving me a text to bring to you all today as the Lord's people, but I want you to apply it personally to your individual lives and experiences. It's found right in the context of everything that we've read - and do not forget about that, and we'll be applying it in that context. Joshua gives the message of the Lord to the people of God at the end of verse 4: "For ye have not passed this way heretofore" - for ye have not passed this way heretofore.

The theme of my message this morning is 'Courage for the Unknown Road'. As I have outlined at the beginning of our reading for you the history of the people of God thus far in their journey toward the promised land, you will also remember that the evil report was given by the ten spies unto the people of God regarding this promised land that had been given to them by God. The report was not favourable of the ten spies - remember, ten were bad and two were good. Because of that there was somewhat of a revolt among the people of God. They rebelled against Moses, they rebelled against God, and because of that God said to them that every person under 20, they would know this - in the words of the Scriptures: 'Your children shall wander in the wilderness 40 years'. Everybody under the age of 20 years would know this for 40 years in the desert, wandering around in circles because of their unbelief and rebellion towards God.

During that time of going around in circles we read between the lines of the first five books of the Bible that God's people became familiar with the surroundings of the wilderness, even though it wasn't really God's perfect purpose that they should be there, they got used to it. They knew the features off by heart, if you like, for they frequently crossed these old tracks, and re-trod over old paths. They became familiar with this little plot of land that they were wandering through even though they were going towards the promised land. Yes, they had come out of the land of slavery, the land of Egypt; and yes, they were going up and down in the wilderness, but as they come right to the edge of the shore of the Jordan river they had never been at this spot before. They had never crossed the Jordan before. Forty years of familiarity with the wilderness, and wandering around in paths that they knew too well, sights that they had seen before from their childhood, many of them - but as they stand beside the river Jordan they're on new territory, they're on new ground, there are new difficulties that they are anticipating facing in the days that lie ahead of them, and a new series of events lie before them.

It's not too hard, is it, to make the application from the word of God to us today as we stand at the brink of a new year. We will face strange paths, we will go through new experiences, we will be asked to travel by God along new territories that we have never ever seen before. Throughout the desert experience, 40 years, of these children, many a time they fretted, they worried, they became anxious, they stepped back from the brink of crossing over into God's land of promise, and they ran away from it - that's why they were 40 years, a journey that should have taken a matter weeks or even, at the very longest, months. But as they stand before the Jordan God says to them: 'Ye have not passed this way heretofore'. As we stand in a place that we have never been before, and are about to embark upon an untrodden way that we have never been, there is a danger that we can too become anxious and fretful, and the fear of the unknown can grip our hearts and our lives.

Before I say anything else this morning I want to lay down this foundation very firmly: the importance of faith and trusting God, that is having a sound trust in God in our pilgrimage down here on earth. There's nothing more awful than a distrustful, fretful Christian; an anxious and a worrying child of God. I'll tell you why: because that more than anything robs God of His glory, the glory that He is the great Jehovah who can guide us through the pilgrim land; the glory of His word that tells us that God is trustworthy; that He is a God who provides, Jehovah-Jireh; and that He will bring us through whatever difficulties there are. It was the Israelites' distrust, 40 years in the wilderness, that dishonoured God. Really by inference, it was claiming that God was less than His word in following through and coming through for them.

Now you don't have to read too much of the word of God to find out that the Spirit of God energetically encourages us to trust in God. In fact that, if anything, is what the whole book is about, apart from declaring who God is as a revelation of His person, it is to encourage men who are but dust and fallen in depravity to reach out and to trust God. You only need to look at Isaiah chapter 40, that great passage of comfort, to see that the will of God is that His children should be comforted: 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem'. God wants us, and we can conclude that God desires His saints to be comforted as they go through this earthly pilgrimage - and to lose that comfort is a serious matter. Spurgeon said: 'He glorifies God most whose faith staggers least'. George Mueller, that great pioneer of faith who trusted God in a way that many of us perhaps - I hesitate to say this, I hope that you do trust God in the same way, but many of us will never do so - he said: 'The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith', isn't that right? 'The beginning of anxiety is the end of faith', and he goes on, 'and the beginning of true faith is the end of anxiety'.

Now I don't know what trials you're going through today as we meet in this place, but one thing I know, a common trial that we will all face in the days that lie ahead is the unknown. We will all know change, in some small or large way we will step onto new territory, be found in novel circumstances and experiences, and within all of us I would say there is an inbuilt tendency against change. We build our little nest around us, and we want to live in our nest and die in our nest - and even if the present circumstances that we're living in at the moment are unsatisfactory and are very difficult, it's better the devil we know than the devil we don't, isn't it? We don't want to be launched into an even deeper problem, or even a different problem - perhaps we've even become used and comfortable with the problems that we're in at present.

I wonder am I speaking to folk today who are fearing what the new year holds for them. Maybe you're fearing new truths that God will reveal to you, and that you will have to be obedient to. Many people fear spiritual attainments: 'What if God should come into my home, or into my church in real revival blessing, and I would be shoved out of my comfort zone and my spiritual lukewarmness?'. People fear that, God taking a real dealing with them - maybe you're unsaved here this morning, and you fear that this year God should convict you with the guilt of your sin and God should save you! I pray to God that we'll all know that moving of the Spirit of God in our lives. Maybe you fear that God will lead you out in a new work that He's never asked you to do before - full-time service for the Lord in some shape or form, missionary service, going out as an evangelist, working among young people or children, I don't know what it is. Maybe it's a disease, so many of us here in this fellowship have suffered disease and sickness in the year that has gone by, but perhaps your concern and anxiety is that the disease would get worse, or that the pain would increase, or maybe even at the end of it all there is death in this year!

Some fear poverty, some fear old-age, some are dismayed at the prospect of separation from a friend or a loved one with whom your heart is wrapped. I don't know what it is, but I'll tell you this much: all of these fears, no matter what they may be, exercise an awful influence on the child of God - for we are not given a spirit of fear. It's easy saying these things, but change too often can hold upon us a paralysis that prevents us going on for God, and going into the service and into the depths and the fullness that God would want us to. Old W.P. Nicholson said: 'If Satan can't stop us getting converted, he will do all in his power to get us diverted'. One of the greatest ways the evil one can get us diverted is to give us these fears of unknown uncertainties that are ahead of us in days or years or decades that lie ahead.

Now my aim this morning in bringing the word of God to you is to help some of you, to help some of you who are entering into the unknown year in fear - perhaps even paralysed, being terrified by what is ahead that you don't know, but you fear the worst. I want you to see that with the people of God, as this fresh emergency came in vogue and arose among them, they had new orders from God. When there was a new trial and a new path, God came in by His Spirit and gave them new orders and gave them divine directions. I want you to see today that we will always have the leading and guidance and direction of the Spirit of God if we will but wait for it, and if we will cry to the Lord like the Psalmist: 'Teach me Thy way, O Lord'.

Now there are three things that I want us to see today, and if we take them to heart I believe that God will deliver us, deliver us, from the fear of the unknown, and will bolster us with courage for whatever the year holds. The first thing is this: you need to seek the word of God, you need to seek the word of God. If you look at verse 1 for a moment, it says: 'And Joshua rose early in the morning' - now I'll stop there. Joshua rose early in the morning, now you don't have to read too far in this book - up to chapter 8 - to find that Joshua was an early riser. You find it in this chapter, chapter 6, chapter 7, and chapter 8 it says: 'And Joshua rose early in the morning'. Now why did he rise early in the morning? Did he just like the morning? Did he like to see the frost on the ground like this morning? Did he feed some cattle? No, nothing like that, but if you turn back to chapter 1 of Joshua and verse 8, he is obeying God's word to his heart. God told him: 'This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success'. God had commanded him in the mornings to be around the book of God, devoting time in prayer to God, meditating upon the word of God.

I have heard men say that you can't be dogmatic on this, but I'm going to be dogmatic anyway. Because I believe that the ordained, sovereign time that God has set to meet with Him is the morning - the primary time to meet with God is the morning. Now I'm not saying that's the only time: 'Evening, and morning, and afternoon will I pray and cry aloud and seek God's face', David said. Morning is not the only time, but I believe that God has ordained in the practice of these men of God, and some day I'll take time and preach on it the whole morning, God has ordained the morning that we should rise, and God's face should be the first that we look into, and God's voice should be the first that we listen to, and His ear should be the first that hears our voice.

The Psalmist said: 'Oh God, Thou art my God, early will I seek Thee. My soul thirsteth for Thee, my flesh longeth for Thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is'. If there is a good example for you to follow as you enter into the unknown year, it is the example of Joshua - and our Joshua, the Saviour, Jesus, Yeshua. It says in Mark 1:35 and in other places in the Gospels: 'And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, he went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed'.

Now I hope you don't think I'm too simplistic in saying this, and I'm not saying it in ignorance of other factors and circumstances - but I have found in my short experience, if any experience there is, that at times those who buckle under life's trials are those who are not standing firmly on the word of God. That's what I've found. More and more in counselling situations, and even recently in the mission in Cookstown I was talking to a person, and they were lamenting to me how they'd lost the joy of their salvation, how they had been backslidden in various sins and found that they were always going with the crowd and never had the strength of victory in their life. One of the very first questions I asked him was this: do you read your Bible? Do you read your Bible? Is that too simple? I'll tell you: it's not too simple, for time after time after time again they say: 'No, no'.

It may be simplistic to you, but I believe the man that says: 'When you see a Bible that's falling apart, it belongs to a man or a woman whose life is not falling apart'. If you want to have a blessed new year, not

without trials, but knowing the presence and power and guidance of God in the midst of your trials - I urge you at the beginning of the year: get into the word of God, morning by morning. Get a reading scheme - we were selling them the other evening, we'll be selling them tomorrow evening - but buy one and follow through the word of God! Not just one verse a day with a bit of a devotion, get into the word of God and He will guide you through it! We need it, surely you know we need it? For we don't know what's ahead of us in an unknown future.

This place, you've never been to before, He said to these Israelites, you've not passed this way heretofore. So it's inevitable, it makes sense that if we've never been here before we're going to need the Lord's guidance and presence as we step out each day. When we read the word of God, and pray to the Lord, and meditate upon it, and have communion with the Lord - do you know what happens? We actually put God into our situations, and God paves the way before us, He goes before to direct; and we must follow because God knows the way, God leads the way, and God opens the way.

There's the first piece of advice from the word of God, this verse 11 says He is the Lord of all the earth; and therefore if He is guiding us through His word we ought to have nothing to fear. The second thing I want you to see is that we need to look to the Ark of God. You need to seek the word of God, but you need to look to the Ark of God. Now if you look at the second half of verse 3, it says: 'When ye see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests the Levites bearing it, then ye shall remove from your place, and go after it'. Now the significance of that is that when the Ark of God was at rest in the camp of Israel, it was always in the midst of the camp, it was right in the middle - and you've seen those pictures of the Tabernacle, of course the Ark of the Covenant was in the Tabernacle, and all the tribes of Israel camped around the Tabernacle, around the Ark theoretically, in the wilderness. So when the Ark was at rest it was in the middle of the people. When the people were in procession and marching the Ark of God would be in the centre of that procession, right in the middle as the people were in caravan to their next destination.

But this is a unique position for the Ark of God, right up at the front of the people who are about the cross over the Jordan river. The significance of this is that it marks a very special occasion and event in the life of God's people. It's special, it's extraordinary, it's a solemn occasion. The specific Levites that used to carry the Ark were not the ones that are carrying it here, there's a different group of priests and Levites - another sign to signify that this is a special event. Now what's special about it? Well, not only was it to be before them but it says that it was to be before them, verse 4: 'Yet there shall be a space between you and it, about two thousand cubits by measure' - that's about a mile, almost a mile ahead of the people as they were marching. The reason was that if they were too crowded together and the Ark was at the very front of them, people at the back and people at the middle wouldn't be able to see it - the view of the Ark would be intercepted. So there was a space of about a mile put between the people and the Ark, why? So that the Ark would be visible for all in the camp to see, so that the Ark would be recognisable as their guide along the untrodden way that they had never gone heretofore.

Do you see it? Well, it's the time to cross the Jordan, and they stand at the brink, the shore of that great river - and it's now in the flood stage because the snows of Lebanon mountains in harvest time melt, and all the great waters come down, and now the Jordan is very deep and extremely wide. But they're told: 'You keep your distance from the Ark, because everybody in the camp has to be able to see it'. I don't have time to go into Old Testament typology, but I'm just going to say this: the Ark of God signifies the Christ of God. Where the blessing of God is, the presence of God on earth was there, in the Holiest place of all, signifying that mercy seat of the Christ who died for us, and His blood that was shed on our behalf to bring us into the very presence of God. Now what's God saying to us today? If you're to go into the unknown new year, you need to seek the word of God, but you need to always keep your eyes upon the Ark of God, the Christ of God.

What does the distance mean? Well, I venture to say that the distance means that we have to keep a respectful and reverential distance between us and Christ, with regards to delving into the mysteries of His person and His character. Sometimes there is a shameful familiarity with regards to looking at certain aspects and practices in the life of Christ when it is a mystery - God manifest in flesh - so we're to keep a reverential awe and distance of worship, but yet with that distance there we're to keep our eyes on Him! Oh, you'll not go too wrong this year if you keep your eyes on the Lord - and I'll tell you, that above all things will assure you a victory.

Remember Peter? We're so hard on him, I wish I had half of his courage. He steps out of the boat, remember that now! He steps out of the boat, and he walks on the water - he walked on the water when he kept his eyes on the Master, and then when he heard the winds and the waves; the Bible says he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid, and beginning to sink he cried: 'Lord, save me!'. Do you see what happened? When he got his eyes off the Ark of God he became afraid, and then he sank; and these priests were being asked to get their feet wet. Both these things tell us that it takes great faith to walk on water, and it takes great faith to do the greater and walk through the water.

I'm asking all of us today in this place: are you still lingering in the boat for fear, are you still lingering on the banks of the Jordan because you fear the untrodden and unknown way? Well, let me tell you that if you seek the word of God, and if you, my friend, look to the Ark of God the future will become your friend, and when you follow the Lord and trust His promises you will have victory even in the depths of the darkest experiences that this year can throw up against you. I love that hymn: 'O pilgrim bound for the heavenly land, never lose sight of Jesus' - that's the secret.

In the quiet place this morning I was meditating upon a hymn - I don't think we ever sing it in the Believer's Hymnbook, but every time I say that somebody corrects me that we sing it all the time but I've forgotten! Number 182, listen to this:

'Oh, eyes that are weary,
And hearts that are sore,
Look off unto Jesus,
And sorrow no more!

The light of His countenance
Shineth so bright,
That on earth, as in heaven,
There need be no night.

Looking off unto Jesus
My eyes cannot see
The troubles and dangers
That throng around me.

They cannot be blinded
With sorrowful tears.
They cannot be shadowed
With unbelief--fears.

Looking off unto Jesus.
My spirit is blest,--
In the world I have turmoil,
In Him I have rest.

The sea of my life
All about me may roar--
When I look unto Jesus
I hear it no more.

Looking off unto Jesus,
I go not astray;
My eyes are on Him.
And He shows me the way.

The path may seem dark
As He leads me along,
But following Jesus
I cannot go wrong.

Looking off unto Jesus,
My heart cannot fear:
its trembling is still
When I see Jesus near:

I know that His power
My safeguard will be.
For, "Why are ye troubled?"
He saith unto me.

Soon, soon shall I know
The full beauty and grace
Of Jesus, my Lord,
When I stand face to face:

I shall know how His love
Went before me each day,
And wonder that ever
My eyes turned away'.

Seek the word of God, look to the Ark of God, and finally trust yourself to the providence of God. This was a place they had never been before. Now listen: Joshua had been there before, Caleb had been there before - not the Jordan, but you remember that they were among the throng that passed through the Red Sea. But there was, in the majority of the rest of them, a fresh generation born in the wilderness who had no recollection of the Red Sea and had no faith prepared by the great miracle that they had seen in the Red Sea. Some men put a lot by experience, and they're right to do so, but experience isn't everything because I'll tell you this: experience never helps you through an experience that you've never experienced before - the ground that you have never passed this way heretofore.

As they stand at the brink of the Jordan, they see the river full to the brim, and they ask the question: 'How are we going to cross it?'. They had no apparatus to cross it, they had no canoes in their tents - and as they stand at the shore, maybe they think: 'Well, suppose we do cross it. We'll go into this great walled city of Jericho and ferocious enemies, men like beasts behind it, and they'll devour us. Suppose we do defeat the people, and the men of Jericho - there are hundreds more cities just as ferocious and wicked as Jericho, and

we've to wipe all them out too!'. I'll tell you, their circumstance was one that might naturally excite a thousand fears, but what I want you to see is this: that faith and trust in the providence of God drove all their fears away! God sent His consoling word, and in their time of need they were given faith to be tried and God sustained them by His power - and there's no sign here of them drawing back and running away as they did 40 years before in the wilderness!

Isn't it wonderful? My friend, are you in a case like this? Are you in a place today that you've never been before? Are the demands upon your strength more heavy than at any former time? Or is your faith tested more than it has ever been? Or maybe you're fearing all of these things, as the conglomeration of tragedies that will be ahead of you this year? Well, I want you to listen very carefully in the closing moments, listen to these comforting thoughts. One: this year may be unknown to you, but this year is of God's appointing. Have you heard that? You ask the Israelites: 'Well, how did you get here?', they say 'We didn't come here, we followed this fiery cloudy pillar, and we watched by day and night and followed it wherever it went, and Jehovah brought us here!'. It's Jehovah has brought you to this new year, and whatever will come across your path, you need to see that God's providence never brings us to a wrong position, His wisdom cannot err at all, He maketh no mistakes.

It's only if you see the circumstances with the eye of fear that you'll fall, but if you see it with the eye of faith you'll see - I find this hard to accept, but this is what you've got to accept - you'll see that you're in the best possible position, for God always chooses the best for His people. Listen carefully: if it had been better that there was no devil, for the people of God now, if it were best that there had been no devil and that there be no death, there wouldn't be any devil or any death for the children of God. He would have taken us straight home, He wouldn't have let us go through any of it - do you believe that now? That all things are for the good of them that love Him! You have to believe that!

Think about this other thought: this year's untrodden way is new to you, but it's not new to God - it's not new to God. He doesn't know the word 'yesterday', He doesn't know the word 'tomorrow', He only knows the word 'today'. Where you will be tomorrow He is today - and a thousand, ten thousand, a million years ago He knew your trial and your sorrow - it's not new to Him. What is a new path to you is an old path to God, better than that: look higher to the very throne of God, look at the right hand of God to the Man of Calvary and see one there who not only knows the path that you will go through that is new to you as old, but who has gone through it Himself! What about that? He has gone through the room of your darkness, whatever it may be, before you - and as He's gone through it, He's sown it with light so that it will not be as difficult for you. Isn't it wonderful?

There's more, my friend it's not only not new to God, but it's not new to the people of God. Joshua and Caleb had trodden this path before as they'd gone through the Red Sea, and don't ever think that your woes are peculiar to you. Some people say to me: 'David, if I only knew that someone else was going through this' - they are going through it! More than that, they have come through it and done so victoriously! 'Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you' - better: this untrodden way goes in the right direction. If the Israelites knew that the way that they were going was going to lead them back into Egyptian slavery they would have a right to say to God: 'No, we're not going that way' - but they knew that it would end in a land flowing with rivers, and a land flowing with milk and honey. Is that not our case?

Best of all, listen: whatever our untrodden, unknown year holds, if we seek God's word, and look to the Ark of God, and trust in the providence of God it will bring glory to the Christ of God. What do I mean? Look at verse 7: 'The LORD said unto Joshua, This day will I begin to magnify thee in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with thee'. Who was with you when everybody else deserted you? Who ministered to you and nursed you when you were lying in a sick bed and your bones

were poking through your flesh? The Great Physician. Who was with you when you went through that wilderness of sorrow? The Good Shepherd. And at the very brink of death, if you have to go through it - and maybe you've watched it and you've seen everything mortal melt away - you still know in the depths of your soul that He is the life, and the fullness that He gives is sufficient to fill the soul when all the other created joys disappear. I'll tell you this: it will magnify Jesus if you go on that untrodden way with faith, and if you say: 'Lord, whatever will magnify Christ, I'll go through anything, I'll give up everything to glorify Him'.

Though you have not gone this way heretofore, God's word says: go forward! And may the Joshua of our souls lead us all unto the victory.

Our Father, it was the Lord Himself that told us that this road is the hard one, it is the narrow one - but, our Father, it is the one that leads unto life eternal, it is the one that leads to Jesus. Lord, thrill us as we step into the unknown with Thy word, with Thy Christ, and with Thy providence - and though we step on ground that we have not passed through heretofore, that we will know the Lord God going before us. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - January 2003

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"How Many Crowns In Heaven?"

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Let's read together from the word of God, from 2 Corinthians chapter 5 - the second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians and chapter 5 and verse 10 - and Paul writes: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or worthless". Romans, the book of Romans and chapter 14, Romans chapter 14 and verse 10, and Paul again says: "But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ". And thirdly, and finally, 1 Corinthians - which is our main reading - 1 Corinthians chapter 3 and verse 9: "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire".

We're going to take this as our main passage this morning, the subject that I want to speak to you on this morning is one that has been upon my heart - and one that, in fact, someone asked me, perhaps, could I maybe speak upon it at some occasion. The last Sunday evening I preached was on 'The Great White Throne Judgement', but this morning I want to preach on 'The Judgement Seat Of Christ' - under the title 'Any Crowns In Heaven?'. I do have the cold - in fact I think I've got a touch of the flu! - so if I collapse, don't worry, I'm not dead! I can be resuscitated, and the Pastor's ready to come and jump in here in my place.

This passage of scripture, and the subject 'The Judgement Seat Of Christ', is one that, perhaps, we don't hear too much about today. The question [that] often arises in our minds is: 'What is the judgement seat of Christ? What is it like? Is it like the judgement that we were thinking about a couple of weeks ago, or is it different?'. Some people have in their minds an idea of the judgement seat of Christ as being like a Sunday School prize giving, when you get the prize for your attendance to church, or your faithfulness in various areas of your Christian life. Is it like that? Or is the judgement seat of Christ not simply a prize giving ceremony, but is it a fearful testing of the child of God? I believe, deep down in my heart today, that we live in a Christian age in our society, here in Northern Ireland, that is one that has very little commitment in it. People today, whether it be in church or outside of church, do not want to commit themselves to anything. They may well do things, they may well attend, but to actually sign their name somewhere, and commit themselves, and say that they're going to do something - give their word - well, it's hard to get that today. It's hard to get committed Christians, full-stop, perhaps. And I wonder, this morning, could that be because we have no vision of the judgement seat of Christ - or perhaps if we do have one, we have a distorted one.

I want us this morning, to look at the word of God, and to look at these scriptures together, to see what the Bible has to say about the judgement seat of Christ. Now I apologise if there was a little confusion the last time I preached, on who would be before this judgement seat - the Great White Throne. It will only be unbelievers, those who are outside of Christ, those who are not born-again - it will only be they, who stand before the Great White Throne of God's judgement. You need have no fear, as a child of God, about that judgement. But who then will stand before this judgement seat - the judgement seat of Christ. Well, the word of God clearly teaches, and we've read together from 2 Corinthians 5 verse 10 that 'we', it says, 'shall all

stand before the judgement seat of Christ'. Paul says 'we' - who was Paul writing to? Well, Paul was writing to the Church in Corinth, and he uses this collective term, 'we as Christians, we as the believers, the saints in Corinth, we one day will stand before the judgment seat of Christ'. So we can be sure of the subjects of this judgement. The subjects of the judgement seat of Christ will be believers.

You might say to me, 'David, how can believers be judged? What are we judged on? Are we judged upon whether we're worthy to get into heaven? Are we judged - are our good works and our bad works weighed together on a supernatural balance to let us through the gates, the pearly gates of glory?' Well, the Bible does not teach that. You see, the judgement seat of Christ is not a judgement concerning our salvation, it doesn't determine whether you get into heaven or whether you're banished to hell, but the judgement seat of Christ is about the works of believers. It's not about our sin, it's not a judgement where your life will be set before you - remember how we thought about it, and every deed that you have done, every wrong deed, every wrong word, every wrong thought will be brought to your consciousness, you would relive everything that you did - that is not the judgement seat of Christ. You, as a born-again believer here this morning, will never face such a future - praise God! So what is it? It's a judgement of your works.

What is the time of this judgement? Well, Paul says 'we shall all stand before the judgement seat of Christ'. If you turn to 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians chapter 4 and verse 5, you'll see that Paul says: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts: and then shall every man have praise of God". 'Then', it is something that is in the future, it is something that is still to happen. So all of us here who are born-again, who are Christians, it is in the future for us all - for the church of Jesus Christ, whether in heaven, whether the church militant upon the earth, the whole church of Jesus Christ still has to face this final judgement. It will take place when the church of Jesus Christ is taken out of the earth, and they are translated from this scene of time to glory, as the bride of Christ, to the marriage supper of the Lamb - but before all of that, as they are taken to glory through the air, as the Lord comes to the air for them - their judgement will take place there, straight after the church of Jesus Christ is evacuated from planet Earth. That's the timescale.

What about the place? The place is the judgement seat of Christ, and the Greek word for it is 'bema'. And it simply means this: if you were a Greek athlete and you were competing in the Olympics or athletics, you would run for a prize. And once you ran the race - and say you came first, second or third - there would be a large platform that would be raised with a seat upon it, and upon that seat there would be a man called an 'umpire'. The Greek word for that seat was 'bema'. It was a judicial seat, whereby the umpire declared who won the race, who got gold, silver or bronze, or who got nothing. And the picture that we have before us of the judgement seat of Christ, the bema, is this one of a race and of the winners receiving something from the umpire upon his judgement seat. What they usually handed out were laurel wreaths, that were placed upon their heads for first, second and third prize. We know that when we read the word of God and the epistles, don't we, that Paul often likens the Christian life, the Christian walk, [to] a race, [to] an athlete, who gives everything, who pours all his energy, all his zeal, everything that he has, all his life, all his money, all his time into this race - so that he may run to win a prize - and at the end of the race he will face the judgement.

The first thing I want us to notice together, this morning, about the bema is: the bema's basis for judgement. The bema's basis for judgement - we find it in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians, and verse 12: "Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it". I've already said that believers - listen this morning! - you have no fear of being judged, one day, for your sin. Why? Because the judgement upon sin for believers has already taken place! I want you to get this today: you were the subjects of that judgement, the time of that judgement was AD30, the place of that judgement was a hill called Golgotha, Calvary - and the basis for that judgement, listen: was a finished work, where every believer had his sins judged upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Hallelujah, this morning, that we will never, ever face a judgement for our sins! Never will the hidden

sins of our life, those things that we couldn't tell the nearest and dearest to us - the skeletons in our cupboard - those things, if we're saved today, are under the blood of Christ. Oh what peace, my sin - oh the bliss of this glorious thought - my sin, not in part but the whole, is nailed to His cross, and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, oh my soul! Christian, your sins have already been judged. You're justified before God, the slate has been wiped clean, He will never judge you again.

But you see the danger is that we fail to realise that as Christians, one day, we will not be judged with regard to our sins, but we will be judged with regard to our works. Judgement, not for salvation, but judgement for reward, or judgement for loss. Now often there can be confusion about this in our minds - there's a tension, almost, between grace and works. That we have in our heads that: 'By grace are ye saved through faith, that not of yourselves, it's a gift', you can't work for it, you can't buy it. That's true, but James also says that: 'Faith without works is dead'. You see, you can't work for your salvation, but you work from salvation, you work out your salvation and because you have the life of God in you - you live the life of God through your daily works. Sometimes we can become (and I'd better watch what I say here!) too 'Calvinistic' - that we think that we can do nothing in our lives to please God, that we can do nothing in our lives that will reward us, that God will look upon, and smile upon it, and one day will present us with a reward. And if you maybe don't like what I'm saying here this morning, well, listen to Calvin: 'There is no inconsistency in saying that God rewards good works, provided we understand that nevertheless men obtain eternal life gratuitously'.

We're not talking about salvation this morning! You can't work for it! And the life that you have in you, that will make you do good works for the Lord Jesus, it hasn't been put there by you, it's been put there by God - therefore salvation is of the Lord. But if you do do good works, you will be rewarded for it. Make no mistake about it. Oh to think, Christian today - think of this just for a moment - that our life, your seven day week, Sunday to Saturday, every hour, every minute, of every day of our life is putting [together], word by word, the sentence that Christ will speak about ourselves on that day of judgement. Think of that! Every single day of our lives we are manufacturing, as servants, our own adjudication at the judgement seat of Christ. Oh, that ought to make us live carefully, that ought to make us redeem the time - but does it? Have we lost sight of the judgement seat of Christ? That what Christ will declare about us on that day, we are determining by the way that we live here and now!

Let's clear it up: in the past God dealt with us as sinners, in the present God deals with us as sons, but in the future God will judge and deal with us as servants and as stewards. What does it say that the basis for judgement will be? Well, we've seen, look at verse 12: '...our works...'. And our works can be categorised, really, into two categories, not six but two: 'Gold, silver, precious stones', that's one category, 'Wood, hay and stubble'. Now, the smallest child here this morning - if I put gold, silver and precious stones there and wood, hay and stubble there - they would be able, with the human eye to tell the difference. But, you see, the word of God says that this, in eternity future, must be tested by fire. You might say: 'David, well why does God need to test it by fire? If it's clearly different - wood, hay and stubble, and precious stones, gold and silver?'. This is the point that Paul is making, the Holy Spirit is making this point: that in the eyes of men, in the eyes of your Pastor, in the eyes of a church or a community the things that you do, the works of your flesh - they may look genuine, but one day God will have to test them by fire. And we know about gold, silver and precious jewels, what happens when you put them in the fire, through a furnace? They resist the fire. But wood, hay and stubble, what happens? They are consumed by the fire.

My friends if you had a 'mamby, pamby, airy, fairy' picture of the judgement seat of Christ in your mind today, like a Sunday School prize giving - I hope that I've changed your mind. Because this day will be a fearful testing when all our works - all of our works - will be tested, judged by fire.

'Wood, hay and stubble', I've often heard referred to by Christians or preachers as being 'rubbish'. Well, any farmer here will know that wood, hay and stubble is not rubbish. Wood can be used to build a house, or a

barn, or a boat, hay can be used to feed - maybe somebody can tell me later what stubble is used for! But I'm sure it's used for something! But the point is this - listen, I want you to grasp this - wood, hay and stubble can only be used down here. They are things of the earth, that's why farmers use them, they are things of this world, the soil. But the jewels that Paul is speaking about picture the book of the Revelation, where heaven is described as the streets paved with gold and all the jewels, and what Paul is saying here is: the things that count are the things, the treasures, you build for up there.

Could it be that because so many Christians have become so materialistic, so career-conscious, that they have lost the vision of the judgement seat of Christ? Chopin, the great musician, in one of his first concerts, his concert was full of mistakes. But after he played his concerto the whole audience rose to their feet, but there was one old man sitting in the corner in the front seat, and he sat where he was, he didn't move. That old person was Verdi, his master and his trainer - why? Why did he not rise? When the whole of the building rose and stood to their feet in adoration and praise, he remained sitting down - why? Because he knew the mistakes that were there.

Listen, friends this morning, while men may applaud what you do - God sees the mistakes. The Master sees them! He sees the things that you do in the flesh and not in the spirit. He sees - He can see into the future - the things that perhaps you may even do today, that when the fire of God and Christ's eyes that were like flames of fire, light upon them they will go up in smoke.

That is the bema's basis for judgement. But I want us secondly, and finally - before I conk out! - to look at the bema's bountiful reward. The bema's bountiful reward and the bema's bad loss. If you look at the passage with me you see that in verse 10: "Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire". There is reward and there is loss! You're not home and dry when you're saved! Do you know what I hate people saying? That 'Salvation is all that matters'. Salvation matters a great deal, but it is certainly not all that matters. Salvation is only the door that enters into the great life that God in Christ has for you - it's only the start! You start on a clean slate. You start, and the prospect is that you're running for the finishing line, you're running, competing for the prize - and if you get it you'll get rewards, but if you don't you'll experience loss. Don't worry about it now - you'll stay on the track, you'll never go to hell, if your soul is washed with the blood of Christ you'll be in heaven, you'll be saved - but will your works count?

What are the rewards that the Bible talks about at the judgement seat of Christ? Well, I had an overhead - but the photocopier ate it! So if you want a sheet, [where] I have outlined all the crowns that the Lord will give on the day of judgement, ask me afterwards and I'll be very glad to give you one. Let's look at them for a few moments this morning, the first is found in 1 Corinthians chapter 9, 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and verse 25, and Paul says: "And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible". What is he talking about? He's talking about this: an athlete trains, an athlete disciplines himself, he doesn't have a fish supper every night, he goes running every day, he trains, he disciplines himself, he masters himself, he controls his body and he doesn't give into the temptation of lying-in in the morning, or missing a training session - he goes for gold, and he does that for a corruptible crown, a crown that will fade away. Paul says we as Christians, we ought to compete, we ought to buffet our bodies, control our bodies, we ought to resist temptation, we ought to have the victory in Christ, and if we do it Paul says, we will receive at the day of judgement an incorruptible crown - or the victor's crown. That is crown number one - the incorruptible crown, the victor's crown.

If you turn to 2 Thessalonians, or sorry 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, we see the second crown - verse 19, Paul says again: "For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord

Jesus Christ at his coming?". The crown of our rejoicing, the crown - he is rejoicing at the fact that some of these souls in Thessalonica will be there at the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ - why? Because he led them to Jesus Christ. This is a crown of rejoicing, or the soul winner's crown.

Crown number one is the victor's crown, those who resist temptation. Crown number two, the soul winner's crown. Crown number three, 2 Timothy, 2 Timothy 4 verse 8: "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing". This is the third crown, the crown of righteousness, for those who love the Lord's return. It's not for those who live their life away everyday, 'As it was in the day of Noah so it shall be at the coming of the Son of Man', when everybody's living, eating, drinking, sleeping as if the Lord will never return again, as if the Lord's judgement will never come - but those who look, those who wait, those who are watching, those who meditate upon it, those who study the Lord's return, will receive a special crown for doing so.

The fourth crown is found in 1 Peter - I'm sorry for going through so many references, but there's so much here that I just want you to familiarise yourself with them - 1 Peter chapter 5 and verses 2 to 4: "Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away". The fourth crown is the crown of glory, it is a crown for shepherds, those elders who look after the flock of God.

The final crown is Revelation 2 and verse 10: "Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life". The crown of life is the martyr's crown, the martyr's crown. Those who suffer for Christ, those across the world - and Andrew could tell us more about it - who suffer, some of them dying for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

My friend, quickly I want to say this to you, listen: can one who never has victory over temptation, can one who falls at every sin that comes along their way, can one like that - a Christian who never has victory in his life - can that person receive the victor's crown? Can one who never led a soul to Christ, can one who never plucked a brand from the burning, who never saved a soul from hell, can one like that receive the crown of rejoicing, the soul winner's crown? Can one who never thinks about the Lord's return and only lives for down here, and never talks about it, never enthuses about it, never looks for His return - every day looking out the window and thinking 'Lord, perhaps today?' - can one like that receive the crown of righteousness? Can the shepherds who never feed the flock, who never feed them the Word of God, who never tend [them] but beat them, who never care for them, can a shepherd like that receive the crown of glory? Can one who never suffers for Jesus Christ receive a reward like unto the crown of life in heaven? My friend, I hope that the Holy Spirit is bringing to you now: 'Will there be any crowns for you in heaven?'. After salvation this must be one of the most important questions: are there any crowns for you in heaven? Or will you suffer loss, as it says in verse 15, you will suffer loss but you yourself will be saved, you'll be saved alright but it says 'yet so as by fire'. Do you know what one translation puts that like? 'Yet so as by fire', like this: that we as Christians have run down the corridors of humanity with the flames licking at our heels. Imagine standing before the judgement seat of Christ and receiving nothing! Just to be saved, just to get out by the skin of your teeth!

Ruth and Boaz had a beautiful relationship together, and within that beautiful book there is a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ and His relationship to His people. And do you remember that Ruth, after her husband was killed in war and her mother-in-law's husband was also killed, that she decided that she would go back to Naomi's land - leave her own people, leave her own family - and go and help Naomi and serve her, and out in the field, remember, she met this man Boaz. But on one occasion Boaz looked upon her in love, for what she had done for Naomi - leaving everything and coming to her - and he said this to her: "The Lord

recompense thy work and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust". Christian this morning, will a full recompense be given to you? Will a full reward be given to you for all that you have done for Christ?

In the Encyclopaedia Britannica there's a story told about an old king - I can't remember which king he was - but his crown had a very priceless, special feather in it. It was a beautiful, colourful, rare feather of a bird of paradise - and to get that feather, the feather had to be plucked alive from the bird, otherwise it would lose its lustre and its appearance. The problem about it was that this bird of paradise lived in the habitat of tigers. To get that one feather five men died. Five men died to get a feather for a corruptible crown! Christian friend today, what ought we to do to receive a heavenly, incorruptible crown that will never fade away? I hope that the Holy Spirit has spoken to you this morning, and I want to leave you with this thought: picture yourself right now - if you want to close your eyes and try to imagine it, do so - standing before the judgement seat of Christ, the bema, and Christ's holiness, Christ's rays from His eyes of holiness penetrating your whole being, looking and scouring and surveying across your life, all that you have done for Him and in His name - and you stand before Him and all you can see is a cloud of smoke.

'He would have me rich,
But I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
And memory will run like a haunted thing,
Down the years that I cannot retrace,
And my penitent heart will nigh break,
With tears that I cannot shed,
And I'll cover my face with my empty hands,
And I'll bow my uncrowned head'.

My Christian friend, this morning, by and by, when you look on His face, will you wish that you had given Him more?

Our Father in heaven, we thank Thee this morning, for what Thou hast done for us. But we have to ask ourselves today what we have done for Thee. We realise afresh today, that only what is done for Christ will last, and we pray that today, and from today on, we would seek to build up treasures in heaven - and we know that one day, when we receive those rewards, that they will be through Thy grace and through Thy power, and we will take them from off our heads and we will cast them at His feet - for He alone is worthy of praise. And we thank Thee, our Father, as we come to this table for the first judgement of our sin upon Him, and we pray now that You'll bless us as we mingle around Calvary. In Jesus name, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - July 2000

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"A Spirit Of Apathy"

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We're going to open our Bibles at that second reading that was given today in Romans 9. Romans 9 and verses 1 to 3, and we'll just read over these verses again just to remind us of what we'll be thinking of today. I want to say first of all that what I have to say is directed towards the young people, but not primarily - it's directed toward us all, it is a lesson to us all, it's something that we need to learn, and it's something that we need to follow in these three verses.

Paul says in verse 1: "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, That I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh".

Let's bow our heads, just for a moment, and ask the Lord's help this morning: Our Father, we thank Thee this morning for Thy goodness to us, we thank Thee for Thy faithfulness and Thy loving kindness. Our Father, we think Thee this morning for our young people. We thank Thee, our Father, for those of them whom Thou hast saved. Father we pray that Thou wouldst build them up in their most holy faith, from strength to strength, and conform them more and more, daily, into the image of Thy Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord we thank Thee for Thy truth, and we thank Thee Lord that it far exceeds all age groups, all maturity. Lord, we pray this morning that as we would open it, and as we would seek to learn from it from, that, our Father, Thou wouldst help us - that Thy Spirit would be here in a very real way. Lord, whatever it is that Thou wouldst have us learn this morning, we pray that our hearts would be open to accept it in grace. For we ask all these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

There is a kind of unwritten rule that preachers have, it's a bit like a preacher's code. It really says that if a preacher shows deep concern or anxiety about something in his message, or - if you like - if he has a hobby horse, something that he keeps coming back to and emphasising with strength and zeal, that it shows that that preacher has a lack of that thing in himself. Now, I am guilty of that this morning, because I am the first to admit that what I am about to speak about, I am greatly lacking in this subject.

You remember, a few gospel services ago, I gave to you a few stories about tragic things that happened in the United States of America. You remember I told you about a mailman who was doing his morning rounds, and as he was going from building to building a sniper from the top floor of one of the buildings shot him in the shoulder. He crawled into a building lobby, and to his absolute amazement he was ordered out of the building for the reason that he was dripping blood on the carpet!

You remember I told you about in Oklahoma city, a pregnant woman was walking along the sidewalk when suddenly she felt the pangs of birth coming upon her. She lay down on the sidewalk and she gave birth. An old lady walked by and stopped to help her, a taxi driver stopped at the side of the road, you remember, and pulled his window down, looked out, then pulled it back up again and went away. That old lady, seeking to help her, ran into a nearby hotel and asked could she borrow a towel to keep the woman warm - but she was refused.

You remember I told you about in Dayton, Ohio a woman drove her car headlong off the harbour right into the Miami River. A dozen people, this time, stood at the side of that harbour looking over the railing, and watched as the car sank to the bottom. They watched as she got out of her car, and stood on the roof and waved her hands and shouted that she couldn't swim! But she drowned.

You remember I told you that so many incidents like this have happened in the state of Chicago, that the Chicago Sun Times - the local newspaper - has opened a file in their library and they have titled it with one word - do you remember what it was? 'Apathy', apathy.

Dr. Lawrence M. Gould, the president of Carlton College, said these words - and I want to listen to them. Listen to them carefully, he said: 'I do not believe that the greatest threat to our future is from bombs or from guided missiles. I don't think our civilisation will end that way, I think it will end and it will die when people no longer care'. Arnold Toynbee (sp?) has pointed out that 19 out of 21 civilisations have died from within - not by conquest from without. There were no bands playing, there were no flags waving, there were no shouts of victory when those civilisations decayed - it simply happened slowly, it happened from within when there was quiet, when there was darkness, when no-one was aware.

Someone has said that the epitaph of our society today should be this: 'This civilisation died because it just didn't want to be bothered, it didn't care'. We can all testify to that, can't we? But as we sit this morning, snug and warm within these four walls of a church building, I don't know about you but I feel that - like a trickle down effect, like a filtering - the attitude of the world with regards to apathy has come into the church. We have assimilated a spirit of apathy.

Young people, I'm talking to you - but I'm not just talking to you, I'm talking to the young marrieds, I'm talking to the middle-aged people and even the older people. The spirit of the age, if it be apathy, has affected all of us. Like Horatius Bonar - we could say that the words that he said have never been truer, because he looked at the church and he said: 'I looked for the church, and I found it in the world. I looked for the world, and I found it in the church'.

However, when we turn our eyes to the passage that we read together this morning from Romans chapter 9, we see a totally different person, a totally different picture. We see the person of Paul the apostle, we see a remarkable character - a man, in fact, whose past has been marked in scripture by the testimony of these words: that this man, before he was converted, was full of zeal and persecuting the church. But then we remember, one day, as we read the Acts of the Apostles, one day as he walked along the road to Damascus going on his way to round up a group of Christians and to feed them to lions, as he was on his way - miracle of miracles - he met Jesus Christ. When he met Christ his whole life was turned upside-down, his whole life was changed, he was saved and now you could say that his testimony was this: that he was full of zeal, not persecuting the church, but building the church of Jesus Christ.

He was a wholehearted man when he was a servant of Satan, when he was a servant of Judaism - but now, because of what Christ had done in his life, he was a wholehearted servant of Jesus Christ. He was sold out for God and His gospel! Listen young people, older people: how different we are today from this man Paul! If we are honest with ourselves, we would have to say that most of us don't seem to have a heart of zeal for anything! And if we do have a heart of zeal, it seems that it's a borrowed heart that we put on, like special clothes for special occasions - we only have an appearance of zeal at times.

But what a change - and try to imagine in your mind's eye for a moment - what a change came over this man Paul. He was a zealous blasphemer, but he had now been changed to an awesome, zealous proclaimer of Jesus Christ! Now think of that: it was just at this time that the church was facing difficulty, the church was facing persecution, and they needed a man - they needed a leader, they needed a man with great ability, with great scriptural knowledge, to confront the persecution that was coming - and God, in His infinite sovereignty and in His infinite wisdom, provided that man.

Paul, to the naked eye, was a mean looking man. He was small, I'm sure, there wasn't anything nice looking about him - but he was far from a mean man. Paul was a man who was proficient in many languages, he was a man who knew the Scriptures inside out - he sat at one of the greatest rabbis, Gamaliel. He was a man who was familiar, not just with Judaism, but with all education, with the philosophies and the learning of the Gentiles. He was a man, that we read about in the Scriptures, who probably became one of the greatest Christians and followers of Christ ever - yet he was a man who said of himself: 'I am nothing'.

What a man this man Paul was! Spurgeon says of him: 'The lion, Saul, had become a lamb. The one who had breathed out threatenings and murderings, now breathed out prayers. He who seemed to burn with enmity became a flame of love for Christ'. You're here this morning, and you're welcome, I don't know why you've come - perhaps you've come with someone, or perhaps someone is singing this morning that's your son or daughter, or a friend - but I want to ask you: have you ever experienced a change in your life like this? When suddenly, like a flash in your life, everything is turned topsy-turvy - why? Because you have met Christ on the road of your life! I wonder has there been a time in your own life where all your motives, all your aspirations, all your desires, everything that you're living for and living in has been totally changed - why? Because Christ, like dynamite, has come into your life and turned it upside-down! Have you ever experienced that? Do you know something? Today, right now, in this place at this very moment, Christ Jesus is alive! He is able to do exactly what he did to Saul, and turn your life upside-down.

What a change there was in this man. What a preacher this man must have been! Can you imagine to hear the apostle Paul, what it would've been like to hear him preach? Just in these three short verses that we read together you see that there are the essential ingredients of a preacher of the word of God. This man had love, he had compassion, and he had an earnestness for the lost. What it must have been to have sat and heard Paul the apostle proclaim the glorious riches of Christ! Now they said that this man was of contemptible speech, but that doesn't mean that he wasn't a good speaker. He mightn't have had a particularly nice voice, he mightn't use words that were frilly and fancy, but this man when he preached, preached words of power. This man spoke lightning words, as it were, that would've went into people's hearts like fiery darts and set them alight for Jesus Christ. Paul was no preacher with icicles on his lips, he hadn't a breath of frost when he was speaking about Christ and God - but this man preached with fervency and power!

Oh that I would be a little bit like Paul as he preached the word of God. Can you imagine what it would've been to hear Paul preach the gospel? It would've been as if he was standing before an open hell, warning people, trying to stop people from falling into that pit - it was as if he was there, he had seen what hell was like, and he was warning people of the love of Christ that could save them from that destruction. Just as they said of the Lord Jesus Christ, you could have nearly said of Paul: almost never did a man speak like this man! Why? Because he was following the example of his Master and Lord.

Let's look quickly at verse 1 that we read together. He says: 'I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost'. Now, what's he saying here? He's saying simply this: 'What I am about to share with you, what I'm going to say to you, it's the absolute truth. There's no doubt about it, it is true - I mean what I'm going to say'. Then, in order to reinforce this, he says: 'I'm telling you the truth in Christ'. He means: 'I'm in union with Christ, and because I'm in union with Christ I can't tell you a lie'. To bring it home further he says: 'My conscience also bears me witness, I'm telling you with a good conscience'. To bring it home even further he says: 'I'm saying it in the Holy Ghost'.

Now, what he trying to say? He's saying: 'Listen, the words I am about to breathe, the things I am about to say, they are absolute truth - you just don't doubt them, I mean what I'm saying'. Now why did Paul have to go overboard in showing that he meant what he says? Well you know, don't you, that the Jews hated Paul - they detested him! To them he was a traitor, to them he was an apostate, there were even 40 men who had sworn that they would kill Paul because of his conversion to Christianity - and it was because of that hate

that was shown towards him that he wanted these Jews that were reading these verses to know that he was telling the truth.

So he goes on to tell the truth, he says in verse 2: 'I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart'. Those words are very strong, they could be literally translated: 'I have great grief, great grief to me is incessant pain in my heart'. What was Paul saying? In Paul's words you can almost feel echoed the anguish of the Lord Jesus Christ! You remember when He came over the Mount of Olives? Do you remember when He stood over Jerusalem with the tears tripping Him, with the sorrow, and the crackle in His heartbroken voice? He said: 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!'.

Paul was no uncommitted bystander - do you hear me? Paul was no Sunday morning only Christian, but Paul was identifying himself with the people who he was brought up with, with the community in which he lived, he was identifying himself with Israel. He says he had an unceasing, endless duration of pain in his heart. He uses a combination of words, he uses the word for 'sorrow' and the word for physical pain to emphasise his discomfort and his plight over the nation. Now listen, listen to this! He's saying here: 'I have physical pain' - think of that! 'Physical pain that I can feel in my heart' - why? Because of the sin of his nation.

Like the prophet before him, Jeremiah, he cries out: 'My bowels, my inward parts! I am pained at the very heart; my heart maketh a noise in me; I cannot hold my peace, because thou O Lord hast heard, O my soul, the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war' - that we heard about in our reading. Like Jeremiah, he stands before his Jewish brothers and sisters and cries and says: 'Let mine eyes run down with tears night and day, and let them not cease: for the virgin daughter of my people is broken with a great breach, with a very grievous blow'. Do you know what was wrong with Paul here? His heart, like a hammer coming down upon it, was broken into a myriad of splinters - why? Because his brothers and sisters in Judaism were on their way to hell.

Let me say this morning that Paul didn't believe in annihilation, he didn't believe that once you were dead you were done for, your life would be blown out like a candle. He didn't believe you would die like a dog in the grave and that would be the end of it. How could Paul's heart be broken if he believed that? But he didn't believe that, Paul believed what the word of God taught: that whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

We can learn so much this morning - young people, listen - from this man Paul. Is your family unsaved, are your friends unsaved, is your mother or your father unsaved, your sons or daughters? Your family, are they unsaved? Well listen, Paul's brothers were privileged as well, they grew up in a land that knew the Gospel, that knew the truth - like our children, like our people. They knew everything, they had the Old Testament Scriptures, they had the prophets, they had the one true God - yet what a tragedy of tragedies: they rejected it all! Today in Ulster, in Portadown, people have grown up - maybe people here - with the Gospel, and yet they sit in their sin still, and have not repented. People, listen, people today in Ulster, in Portadown, need Christ!

For that reason Paul says in verse 3, and listen, let these words burn into your soul: 'I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh'. He goes on, he says: 'For', he's beginning to explain why he has this pain in his heart. He says 'I could wish', now notice he doesn't say 'I would wish' - because it would be impossible for Paul to be cut off from Christ, because if you look at Romans 8 and verse 38 and 39 you'll see that he says that nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus. But he says: 'I could wish, I wish it was almost possible', that's what he's trying to say, 'that I could be accursed from Christ'.

The word that Paul uses there, 'accursed', is the word 'anathema' that you find in Galatians 1 and verse 8, where he said if any man comes unto you, or an angel even comes to you, and preaches another Gospel let him be anathema - it means let him be cursed, let him be damned. Do you know what that word 'accursed' means? It describes, listen, it describes the delivering up to the judicial wrath of God of one person who ought to be cursed or cut off because of his sin. Now listen: do you see what Paul is saying? Listen - it astounds me to even see what he's saying! He is saying that Paul was willing to bear the curse of God, Paul in his spirit was willing to be accursed for Christ as a believer - he had such a love for his people, for his brothers and sisters in Judaism, for his mother and father and for his wider family that he said these words: 'Ah! If even my destruction could save these loved ones of mine, I could almost go that length to see them saved!'

Is that not amazing? Do you know what that is? That's a spirit of substitution. Do you know what that is? That's the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, when it says that the just - the one who didn't deserve punishment - the just became the unjust to bring us to God. Paul said that he wished to be damned, he wished to go to hell, that those who were damned and going to hell could get out of hell! Paul was simply a reflection of his Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Now let me ask you, young people, older people: what do you think of those verses? Now don't sit like on a normal Sunday morning meeting and just listen to the preaching, because that's not why I'm here. What do you think of those verses? This man was willing, if it were possible, to go to hell because of those whom he loved who were going there!

It astounds me that Paul had this constant aching in his breast. Everywhere he went, everywhere he walked, even when he slept he had this constant aching that- look at verse 1 - passed the test of the Holy Ghost. Does our zeal - if we have any zeal - does it pass the test of the Holy Ghost? Or is our zeal, young people, something that comes out on a Sunday? Is it something that comes out at the prayer meeting brethren? Is it something that comes out when the suit comes out? Are our tears, if we do shed tears, are our tears merely crocodile tears? Listen, my prayer this morning is this: oh, that I would get there! To be like Paul, who was ultimately like Christ - what a love he had for the lost! He was willing to pass under the judgement of God to see their salvation.

Oh, that we would lay our lives down for the lost, that we would find hardship, that we would find poverty, perhaps distance from our family, perhaps pain, pressures, suffering, for souls - for winning souls! Can I ask you this morning: do you love souls? I'm not asking do you go to church, do you support the church, do you do a work in the church - I'm not asking you that. I'm asking you do you have a real love for souls? Someone has said that our love for souls is like the thermometer of our Christian life - if that were so, this morning, what temperature would you be? Spurgeon said that if you don't have a love for souls, he doubted if you were even saved at all.

Listen: do you have a love for souls? If we really had a love for souls, young people, you would be at the prayer meeting. If we had a love for souls the prayer meeting before the Gospel meeting would be full. If we had a love for souls we would bring people with us to the Gospel meeting on a Sunday evening, we would go to the outreach team. Paul had a love for souls, so much so that he could go as far as to say that he would long to be cursed from Christ! If I had a love for souls, do you know something? I would be up out of my bed, and I would be on my knees pleading to God for the souls of sinners, for the souls of the children. I would be fasting before God, waiting before God for those in my family who know not Christ - but do you know what the truth is? I am content to sit in my salvation and watch as they go to hell.

I'll tell you something this morning: some of the petty annoyances that we have, some of the bickering that goes on, it would all stop if we had a love for souls. Do you know why? Because the only sorrow and the only pain, the only annoyance that would be in our breast would be like Paul's: because people are going to a lost eternity! William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army said these words, listen: 'Some like to live within the sound of church or chapel bell, but I'd rather run a rescue shop within a yard of hell'.

But before we think of this, do you know what we need to be? Before we can be winners of souls we need to be weepers of souls, like Murray McCheyne. When a tourist, an American tourist, came to his church many years after he died, he came to the Sexton who was the Sexton there when McCheyne was alive. He said to him in his Yankee twang: 'What was the secret of McCheyne's ministry?'. That now old man brought him down the church to the vestry, he led him through the door, he brought him to a table and a chair. There was a big old Bible on the table, and he plonked it down and he opened it. He said: 'Sit at the table', and that American sat at the table, and he said: 'Now, put your elbows on either side of that Bible', and he said: 'Weep for souls for hours'. That was the secret of his ministry! He wept for souls - and before we can win souls, young people, we've got to have a heart of weeping.

Now listen: McCheyne wept for souls, but 89% of Christians have never ever given out a Gospel tract. Let that sink in. McCheyne wept for souls, but 95% of Christians - 95%! - have never led a soul to Christ! Yet Paul could say: 'I could almost wish that I could be accursed from Christ'. David Brainerd, the missionary to the American Indians, could say: 'I care not where I live, or what hardships I go through, so that I can but gain souls to Christ'. He said: 'While I am asleep I dream of these things. As soon as I awake the first thing that is on my mind is this great work. All my desire is the conversion of sinners, and all my hope is in God'. George Whitefield, the great evangelist of the 1700's, echoed the words of Paul when he said: 'Oh Lord, give me souls or take my own soul!'. Henry Martyn, a young missionary kneeling in India's corals strands, cried out to the Lord: 'Here let me burn out for God'. John McKenzie prayed a prayer as a young missionary candidate, he said: 'Oh Lord, send me to the darkest spot on earth'. Praying Hyde, missionary to India, said: 'Father, give me these souls or I die!'. John Hunt, missionary to Fiji Islands, on his deathbed prayed: 'Lord, save Fiji, save Fiji, save these people. Oh Lord, have mercy upon Fiji, save Fiji' - and he passed into the presence of His Lord.

Oh, to have the spirit, and the zeal, and the love for souls that the apostle Paul did as he echoed Christ. That man I mentioned, William Booth, for over 30 years the Salvation Army and William Booth in particular were subject to some of the most vile persecution that Christians have ever suffered in modern times. But the General lived to see the day that he was issued an invitation to Buckingham Palace to see his King. His own King, King Edward VII, invited him to Buckingham Palace, and as he walked in in 1904 the King said these words to him: 'You are doing a great work, a good work, General Booth'. Inviting him to write in his visitors album that old man, now 75 years of age, took a pen and bent over his back and wrote these words in this book - and listen to these, young people: 'Your Majesty, some men's ambition is art, some men's ambition is fame, some men's ambition is gold, but my ambition is the souls of men'.

Young people, you've the rest of your life ahead of you. Some of us are older, some haven't much of life left. But whatever you have ahead of you, let me ask you this morning in closing - listen: what is your ambition? What is your desire? Is it to get a good job? Is it to earn money? Is it to get a good education? Don't get me wrong, education is extremely important, but listen: what is all-important in these days is this fact: that men will only be saved from hell in time, when we are here. The reason why the Lord didn't rapture us when He saved us was because He wanted us to seek the souls of men. May we be able to say today, like Paul in chapter 10 and verse 1: 'Brethren, my hearts desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they may be saved' - or put it in our context: 'Lord, my hearts desire and prayer for Portadown is, that they might be saved'.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - April 2001

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"How To Stay Pure In A Sin Sick World"

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If you have your Bible with you this morning, I'd like you to turn with me to 2 Samuel, the book of 2 Samuel and chapter 11. 2 Samuel and chapter 11, reading from verse 1: "And it came to pass, after the year was expired, at the time when kings go forth to battle, that David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the children of Ammon, and besieged Rabbah. But David tarried still at Jerusalem. And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. And David sent and inquired after the woman. And one said, Is not this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite? And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her; for she was purified from her uncleanness: and she returned unto her house. And the woman conceived, and sent and told David, and said, I am with child".

Psalm 119 and verse 9: "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way?" - or how can a young man keep his way pure? - "By taking heed thereto according to thy word. With my whole heart have I sought thee: O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee. Blessed art thou, O Lord: teach me thy statutes. With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth. I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches. I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways. I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word".

Let us pray: Our Father in heaven, we come before You this morning and we thank You for Your word. We thank You, as another Psalmist said, that Your word is a light to our pathway. Our Father we pray that in the pathway of our lives, from day-to-day, that we would indeed find that Your truth, that Your Scriptures, the word of God would be our direction, would be our guidance, would be the thermostat that determines our lives, our character and our actions. Father, may this word that is so rich in inspiration, in fullness, in vitality and in life - may it be real to us this morning. We pray that the Spirit of God, that He would be here, and that He would help us as we seek to ask what You would say to our hearts today. For we ask these things in Jesus name, Amen.

I wonder would you turn with me - just keeping your finger in that passage that we've just read - but turn back with me to 2 Samuel chapter 11 that we read earlier, 2 Samuel, chapter 11. I read this week that, according to the Reuters report from Stockholm, Sweden has long ago arrived at complete sexual freedom and liberty. Old-fashioned fornication that we read about in the word of God is accepted in that society. Parents have indeed arrived at the opinion that it is normal for their children, for their youngsters, to behave in this way. It is reported that only 5% of girls and 2% of boys go with their purity to marriage. I wonder is that a reflection of the fact that Sweden has the highest percentage of suicides of any country in this world?

In [1974] research firm surveyed 35,000 young people - now remember, 1974 - they were from the ages of 16 to 25. The interviewers sought to learn what their selected individuals felt about important standards and important values in today's world. The study revealed that only 31% viewed premarital relationships as morally wrong, compared to 52% in 1969. Opposition to abortion dropped from 58% to 45%. The proportion who considered living a clean moral life a very important value fell from 71% to 52%. That was 1974.

It seems that patterns are shifting, and we could say today that: 'As it was in the days of Noah, so it is today'. We only have to look at our television screen, look at the media, and even ice cream is advertised by suggestive theatrics. The daily soaps, that many of us are glued to, advocate and defend promiscuous living,

adultery, homosexuality and a variety of other perversions of God's intended ideal and will. Our newspapers - many, indeed, now of the broadsheets - are becoming more, if they have not already arrived at being, pornographic magazines. What was considered 30 years ago as pornography, believe it or not, is on our television screens advertising body creams and perfume. You've all seen it: the camera focuses close-up in black-and-white on a tense, lusting male face, over which is superimposed an amber flame, which becomes a glowing bottle of Calvin Klein's Obsession.

Last year the shock film was the film 'Crash'. I'm sure you've read about it in your newspapers, how the whole plot of that story was to do with sexual exploits with crash victims on the scene. This week, if you've been reading your newspaper, the new shock film - it seems that they're just trying to shock us as much as they can now - it's entitled 'Lolita', this film is nothing more than a glorification of paedophilia - child abuse.

If we think that this is happening just in the world, we are fools. Recently Leadership Magazine, which is a pastoral magazine for ministers, commissioned a poll of 1000 Pastors. It indicated that 12% had committed adultery while in the ministry - that's one out of eight of those thousand! It indicated that 23% did something that they considered inappropriate whilst in the ministry. Christianity Today, which is a more broad magazine that is read by Christians of every sort, they surveyed Christians who weren't Pastors and the figures - those figures - doubled! 23% admitted that they had committed adultery. 45% said that they had committed something that they felt was inappropriate for a child of God. These statistics are shocking, aren't they? They're almost unbelievable - and when we think that most of the people that read this literature, they are people who have been well-educated, college educated, church leaders, elders, deacons, Sunday School superintendents and teachers - and it's left up to our minds this morning to think what the ordinary church member could get up to.

What I want to ask you this morning is this: when we live in a world like ours that sweats sensuality from its pores, and when even the church of Jesus Christ is practising - and in some areas and quarters is actually advocating living in sin - how, how can a young man, how can a young woman (or for that matter and older man or older woman) possibly expect to keep his way pure and to cleanse his life? What hope is there? What hope is there for our children and our young people in a carnal, Corinthian society like our own? It is such an easy thing for us as believers to become desensitised, and even - God forbid it - even in our lives to imbibe these sensual attitudes, the spirit of the age today. How can a young man cleanse his way? How can he cure himself of the problems of our age? How can he prevent getting taken into this sensuality, the flesh of this age that is wreaking havoc - not only around in our world, but today is wreaking havoc in the church of Jesus Christ?

If you look at the passage that we read together earlier in 2 Samuel chapter 11, I believe that there are within this passage various warnings to us this morning as children of God. David, in 2 Samuel 11, was a successful man. He was in his midlife, it seems that he had everything, he had charisma, he had personality, he had musical talent, he was intellectual - it seemed that everything was on the up for King David. What was wrong? Well if you look into this passage - and if we had time we could look at the whole passage, and we could even look at the whole of David's life - if we looked at it we could see that in David there is a progressive degeneration which eventually brought his downfall. This progressive degeneration is something that, I believe this morning, can be identified in every backslider, every child of God that wanders away from the pathway.

Therefore the writer, in 2 Samuel 11, would have us beware of certain things. The first thing I believe he wants us to beware of this morning is: to beware of losing our sensitivity. If you were to turn to 2 Samuel 5 you would read there that David took up power in Jerusalem. But it says in verse 13 of 2 Samuel 5 that, after David had left Hebron, he took more concubines and wives in Jerusalem. When David had left Hebron, when he had taken up the throne in Jerusalem - he had become King - it says that he took more concubines

and more wives when he arrived in Jerusalem. Now, according to Deuteronomy chapter 17, David's taking of extra wives, in the sight of God, was sin. This was forbidden for a King of Israel. A King of Israel, it says in Deuteronomy 17, was not to take unto himself much riches, much livestock, he wasn't to take unto himself many wives - this was forbidden in the sight of God, it was apart from the code of holiness that God had laid down for the monarch of Israel.

Now, I want you to see this morning that David's progressive desensitisation to sin had a consequent inner descent from holiness in his life. His progressive desensitisation to sin had a consequence in his life, for as he went along his life's pathway, and little by little he became more insensitive to the sins that were in his life, it had an effect on his inner walk with God. Now don't misunderstand the biblical text this morning. David taking to himself other wives was perfectly legal - in fact, not only was it legal, but it was something that was culturally acceptable - but the point this morning is this: although it was legal and it was culturally acceptable, it was something that was against the revealed will of God. David's endorsement, and David's even practice, of culturally permitted sensuality - do you know what it did to him? It desensitised him to sin, and it ultimately contributed to his downfall in adultery.

Do you see this? No-one falls, no-one backslides, in a flash! It doesn't just happen right away, there are small little steps where people become desensitised to sin and to the world, and to the things of the world - and before they know it, they are taking bigger steps into sin and sensuality until, before they know it, they have fallen headlong into great sin. We need to beware this morning, because there are certain things in our society today that are cultural, they are cultural sensualities, they are legal indulgences that - in the eyes of the people around us, in the eyes of our government, in the eyes of our society - are seen to be socially accepted. But these things - if we really think about them - they contribute to an inner descent in our holiness.

Young people today, older people today, are expected to watch hours of television unguarded - indiscriminately. In the workplace men, and women now, are expected to laugh at dirty jokes, and even tell dirty jokes. Businessmen are expected to show 'business indiscretion' and turn a blind eye to certain practices. At business-dos and dinners it is expected that you take a little tittle. In relationships it is expected that you go a little farther each year along your relationship, until eventually you might as well be married. This passage warns us in the gravest language that David - this man David, a man after God's own heart - he lost his sensitivity to sin and to the world, and it started in a small little bit, but before he knew it he was on his face in adultery.

But the writer wants us also to notice that: we are to beware of losing our discipline. David had relaxed, it says in verse 1, he had relaxed from the rigours and disciplines that had characterised his life, the activity that was in his life from day-to-day. He should have been at war, he should have been with Joab fighting for the cause, but he knew that it was an easy win so he stayed at home. Now, the problem was not the fact that he relaxed - and there's nothing wrong with relaxation - but David's problem was this: that his relaxation extended to his spiritual life. Has that ever happened to you? He relaxed physically, he relaxed in his life, he retired for a little point - but that affected his spiritual life, and what happened was: he left himself unguarded, he left himself unprotected and he fell. Don't think that David woke up one morning and said: 'Well, it's a lovely day today, I think I'm going to commit adultery'. He didn't! He was a man after God's own heart, he wrote many of the Psalms that we have in the word of God. It wasn't the fact that he intended that day to sin, but he lost - in some way - his sensitivity to sin, and because he was undisciplined on this particular day the Devil got a foothold.

Can I ask you, Christian, this morning: are you losing your discipline? Do you read the word of God from day-to-day? Do you pray daily? Do you have a quiet time with the Lord? Have you lost your discipline with regards to the church of Jesus Christ? Are you found at the prayer meeting? Are you found having fellowship

with God's people? Do you wait behind for the Lord's table that He has commanded you to wait for? Do you discipline yourself in your watching of the television, in the things that you read, in the things that you listen to, the things that you say? We need this - listen, this morning - to beware that we do not lose our sensitivity, to beware that we do not lose our discipline.

But thirdly, he would have us beware something else. He says: beware of losing your focus. Beware of losing your focus - what happened? Think of the scene: it's twilight in the Middle East, in the humid air in the evening - and this man (now in his middle-age, now remember that, he's in his middle-age - he's probably 50) he gets out of his bed and he takes a look out of the window. He sees a curvaceous form of a young beautiful woman, the shadows and the half light making her more attractive. Verse 2 says that the woman was very beautiful, in the Hebrew that's an over expression - she was absolutely gorgeous, she was a beautiful woman. David's problem was not the fact that he looked, but the problem was that after that first glance he looked again, and again, and again. He focused into this woman and he became fixated with her. Kent Hughes, a writer, says this that: 'In that moment David, who had been a man after God's own heart, became a dirty, leering old man'. A lustful fixation came over him that could not be denied.

He lost his focus. I wonder this morning, Christian, young person, have you lost your focus? What are you focusing in on in your life? What are the things that your eyes light upon? What do you watch on the television screen? What is it that comes from the video recorder? What is the music that you are listening to? What are the magazines that you are reading? You see, by focusing on the wrong things in our life we then begin to think about these things and chew these things over. Now, don't get me wrong this morning, there are some helpful things that come on the television - but I don't know about you, but I've yet to find a television that turns itself off before the picture comes on. People would say to me: 'Well, there's a knob on the screen, turn it off!' - but before you can turn it off you've seen something that has harmed your mind.

David Frost - you all know him, the TV presenter - he said this, David Frost: 'Television is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living-room by people you wouldn't have in your home'. Isn't that true? It permits you to see things, and think about things, and listen to things that you wouldn't permit in your home! Often we will indiscriminately - and I'm speaking to myself as well - we will plant ourselves down in front of the television and watch unlimited television, and inevitably - before we know it - we end up focusing or listening to impure things. You know when something happens on the screen - there's a bit of interference - what does it come on? 'Don't adjust your set' - well, listen, my message to you this morning, it's not all about television, but my message to you is this: Don't adjust your life! Don't adjust your life because there's a fault in the world!

I don't know whether you've ever heard of the television Psalm, but I'd like to read it to you this morning. It goes like this:

'The TV is my shepherd, I shall not want.
It makes me to sit down and do nothing for His name's sake,
Because it requires all my spare time.
It restores my knowledge of the things of this world.
It keeps me from the study of God's Word.
Its sound and picture, they comfort me.
Even though I live to a hundred, I shall keep on viewing.
As long as it works, surely no good thing will come of my life'.

We need to be careful this morning - I'm not saying all throw your television sets out, but listen: we need to be careful about what we are focusing upon. We need to be like Job, young men - listen: Job, in Job chapter 31 and verse 1, he said: 'I made a common with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl'. He made an agreement with himself that he wasn't going to do it!

What happens when we focus on something unhelpful? Dietrich Bonhoeffer (sp?) said these words, listen: 'When lust takes control, at that moment God loses all reality. Satan does not fill us with hatred of God, but with forgetfulness of God'. Have you not experienced that? You're doing something wrong, you're thinking about doing something wrong, you're tempted about doing something that is displeasing to God - and what happens? God is as far away as possible from your mind, not just the fact that He is there, but the reality of His presence. Is that not true? Beware of what we focus on.

We need to beware of being desensitised, we need to beware of losing our discipline, we need to beware of losing our focus, but we need to beware of losing our mind. David lost his mind for that split second. David probably said: 'Well, Uriah's away, Bathsheba's on her own - sure, no-one will know. She's probably quite lonely, she probably needs company - sure, it'll be love!'. He began to rationalise his sin. Someone said to him in verse 3: 'Hold on a minute, King. Isn't this Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah?' - and he knew that, he knew that that's who it was, someone had told him, but he began to rationalise in his mind and to think it over.

Sometimes we do that, we begin to rationalise our sin. We say to ourselves: 'Well, it's alright this time. God'll understand if I fall into this sin this time'. We say to ourselves: 'Well, how can something that gives me so much pleasure be wrong? God's not going to deny me anything that would make me happy, He wants me to be happy!'. We say to ourselves: 'Well, if it's love then it must be alright'. Christian so-called 'artists', Christian movie watchers - and I'm saying that, talking about movies that they shouldn't be watching. They say to themselves: 'Well, can I not - as an intelligent adult - evaluate these pictures? Can I not objectively look at these films without letting them affect me, and enjoy the art and the beauty in them?' - and we begin, before we know it, to rationalise everything out until we feel no guilt at all about what we're doing! The more we commit a certain sin, the more we fall into it, the more acceptable it becomes, the more habitual it becomes, the more we rationalise in our mind that it's OK, that God's not angry with us. But the only thing that we don't rationalise about when we're thinking of sinning, is about the way we feel afterwards - isn't that right? You can think of all the reasons why you should do it, and then when you do do it you think to yourself: 'Why did I do that?'. We need to beware of losing our mind.

We need to beware of losing our sensitivity, we need to beware of losing our discipline, we need to beware of losing our mind and losing our focus, but we need to beware like David of losing our purity - he fell! He lost his purity - this progressive degeneration, it led to sin - and the whole of the Old Testament testifies as to what happened to David after he fell. That one sin of adultery led to the sin of murder, as he put Uriah - the husband of Bathsheba - in the front line of the battle and he was murdered (before that he got him drunk!). One sin led to another, and his kingdom began to split up, his child that he bore to Bathsheba died, havoc was wrought in Israel - why? Because of David's sin. Now listen, God forgave him his sin - Psalm 51 is a testimony to that - but listen: don't you think that David is a licence to go and do what you want, because his life was never the same after it! Someone has said: 'Uriah was a better man drunk than David was, at that moment, sober'.

Beware of being desensitised, beware of losing your discipline, beware of losing your focus, beware of losing your mind, beware of losing your purity - but let me, in finishing, just turn your eyes to Psalm 119 for a moment. The question remains this morning: how then, how can a young man, a young woman, or a middle-aged man - remember David was in his middle-age - how can we, in this stinking world, cleanse our way? There are three ways, in Psalm 119. The first thing is this: be careful to read. Be careful to read the word of God. He says this is how we cleanse our way: by living according to Your word. By reading the word of God we cleanse our minds, we cleanse our heart and our life. Let me ask you today, and it might seem silly asking a Christian this but I'm going to: do you read the word of God? Do you really read it, young person? Do you have a scheme for reading it day by day, until you read large chunks of the word of

God? Do you meditate upon it until it's in your heart? Family, parents, do you read the word of God to your children? Deuteronomy chapter 6 and verse 6 says this: 'These commandments that I give you today, are to be upon your heart: impress them on your children, talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up'. Listen, do you know one of the tragedies of our time? The family altar has been lost. Fathers do not pray with their children, some hear them pray in the church and they don't hear them pray at home. Parents don't read the word of God and teach the word of God to their children. Listen, this morning: read the word of God and that's how young men and young women will cleanse their way.

You need to read, but secondly you need to heed the word of God. Verse 9 of Psalm 119 says: 'How can a young man cleanse his way?' - well, it doesn't say by reading His word, it says: 'By living according to His word'. You see, it's not good enough to listen to the word of God, it's not good enough just to read it, to listen to it week after week - but listen: you must live the word of God! Sometimes when I sin, I sin and I think to myself: 'This Christian life's a sham! Nothing is changing in my life! These sins are still taking over my life!' - and I think to myself: 'I'm meant to be a new creature in Christ Jesus, why aren't things different?'. Do you know what's wrong? I expect my life to be changed, but I'm not willing to implement the word of God in my life. I'm not willing to read the word of God with a pen and paper in hand, and when God says to me: 'Don't do this', I write down: 'Endeavour not to do this in your life'. And when we start obeying and implementing the word of God in our life, young people, our lives will be changed!

We need to read the word of God, we need to heed the word of God, and we need to hide the word of God. Verse 11 of Psalm 119 says: 'I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You'. We need to memorise the word of God, and when we do that - when we chew over, like chewing the cud - it becomes part of our lives, and we become epistles - letters, biblical books - written unto the people around us.

How do you get oxygen out of a bottle? You can get a Hoover if you want and you can try and suck it out. You can try and suck it out with your mouth if you want, but the best way to get oxygen out of a bottle is to pour water into it. And the way we cleanse our minds, this morning, the way we get the filth of this world out of our heads, is when we pour in the word of God and then all the dross will come out.

Let me ask you in closing: are we going to be the dummies of the world? The world - listen - the world holds the right opinion, that there can be no such a thing as a worldly Christian - they have that opinion and they're right! Do not, as Romans 12 verse 2 says, do not let the world - young people - press you into its mould. Let's be honest this morning: who has a problem with purity? Who doesn't have a problem with purity? I'll tell you this morning: I have a problem with it. I have a problem with this aspect of purity. And the question to my heart and to your heart this morning is: will we dance to the tune of the television network? Will we make our home the environment where the scripts of the soaps will dictate and will impose a humanist, secularist agenda onto our children? Or will we let the word of God rule our lives? Not in a legalistic way with rules and regulations, but in a vital way, in a worthy way of the Gospel liberty of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Have you failed? Have you? I've failed many times. Have you wandered? Well, why not come back and let the blood of Christ cleanse you from your sin, and let the word of God wash you from that filth? One verse, and I finish with this, that gives me great joy is this - Jude verse 24: 'To him who is able to keep us from stumbling' - and if we read the word of God and inwardly digest it, and implement it into our lives, He is able to keep us from slipping up. May God help you, this morning, to live a life that is pleasing to Him.

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"Visionary Or Stationary"

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I have had a message on my heart from the moment that I received the call, and indeed responded to it. That may seem strange, but it's the truth, and I want to give it to you this morning. It has burned into my soul over the past weeks and months since that event, and I want to share it with you today.

It's found in Proverbs 29 - Proverbs chapter 29 - and it is only one verse of scripture, and even part of a verse of scripture, verse 18. Now, I am breaking a rule here because when I went to college I was taught a lot of things and I've broken a lot of them already! But one of the things you're taught is when you go into a church that you don't do anything too drastic or anything like that, or say anything too drastic. But this message is, I believe, from the Lord - and because it's from the Lord I hope that you can take it this morning. It's an encouragement to you all, that's what I want to do - I want to encourage you all in the Lord.

Proverbs 29 and verse 18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he". There are four names that come into my mind when I read that verse, in a human level. The first is a man called Thomas Edison. The second: a man called Alexander Graham Bell. The third: Martin Luther King, and the fourth was a group of men who, in 1966, landed upon the moon.

Thomas Edison was the man who brought the light bulb to bear on humanity. But that man, he made many mistakes. He made many failures. He was trying to do something: his vision, his dream was to transport electricity to every house in every nation. Benjamin Franklin, before him, in the late 1800s was the man who, you remember learning at school, had the kite and he attached the cord to the kite and the key - and he discovered how electricity transmitted from the sky right to earth. But the point I'm trying to make to you this morning is this: that Thomas Edison, Benjamin Franklin - they had a vision. They had a vision to give something to humanity.

Alexander Graham Bell was a teacher to the deaf, and as a teacher to the deaf he had a vision that one day people all around the world, from one end of the world to another, would be able, in their own homes, in their own nation, to communicate one to another from a distance. He, of course, was the creator of the telephone.

The men who went to the moon - one great step, one great step for all humanity, all mankind - and no matter what you think about it, it was a great step - but it came from vision that these men had, that scientists had, that one day human feet would land upon the moon.

Of course, Martin Luther King was killed for his vision. Without going into all the details of the morality of it all, you can remember the day, or you know of the day when he stood before that great throng and what did he say? 'I have a dream'. All of these men, all of these characters were men, or even women, of vision. The verse that we read together this morning says this: "Where there is no vision the people perish".

Those were human visions but what does this verse mean, and what does the word 'vision' in this verse mean? Well, the Hebrew word in this verse simply means this: 'a sight' - a mental sight in your mind, a dream, a revelation, an oracle, a vision. It comes from the Hebrew root word 'to gaze at', to gaze upon or mentally perceive, to contemplate with pleasure. Now, what it literally means in this verse is this: that without the word of God, without a revelation, without a vision for God the people are naked. Now, if you think about it this morning that is true. If we did not have the word of God I would stand up here - I don't

know what I would say, I would waffle, maybe tell stories, talk about politics or the news - but you would go away from this place spiritually naked. If you did not have the word of God to feed upon, the Bread of Life to feed upon day after day, you as a Christian would be naked.

But inherent within that meaning of the word 'vision' there is that idea of having a sight, of having a contemplation, of having a dream for the future. I want to define that word for you this morning like this, that vision is this: a picture of the future that produces a passion within you. What is vision? It is a picture that makes your heart and my heart race as we think of what God can do in future days. "Where there is no vision, the people perish".

There are two things I want to share with you this morning. I want to ask you two questions. Are you a visionary? Or are you stationary? Visionary or stationary? When I use that word 'visionary' I don't mean a dreamer, I don't mean someone who sits around all day thinking of what could be, but don't get off their behind to make it happen - but when I use the word 'visionary' I mean someone who has a dream, someone who has a vision and will do all in their power to make it a reality.

I want to start with the second first: stationary. Are you a stationary Christian? And really what that means in the context of our verse is this: a visionless Christian. Are you a naked Christian, as the verse says - one who is not ordained with a sight, a perception, a contemplation, a dream, a vision for God in the future. In all my years reading through the Bible I could think of four types of stationary Christians that the word of God brings before us. I want to share with you, quickly, what they may be, and ask us individually, ask us internally: 'Could we, could you, could I be a stationary Christian?'

The first stationary Christian that I find within the New Testament is the traditionalist. If you go to the book of Galatians, or you go to the book of Hebrews, you find there a group of people who were naming the name of Christ. But the problem was that in naming the name of Christ, in claiming, as it were, the promises that were in Christ and in His salvation, they had a problem. Because in one hand they were reaching out for that salvation, but yet in the other hand they could not let go of those things that were behind. Of course, there are so many people who get saved and that's where they are, isn't it? They get saved and they want what Christ gives. Maybe they only profess faith in Christ, they're maybe not really saved and they try to strive after this Christian life and faith in Christ, but they cannot let go of their sin. But there are so many Christians, and second Corinthians and chapter 3 and verse 6 talks about that. That they are people who follow the letter of the law, follow the word of God, but the Spirit of God - the One who has inspired that word, the one who wrote that word - is missing.

Really what it is is something called 'doctrine without power'. Harry Ironside, that great commentator on the word of God, said this in relation - he said: 'Lack of vision will manifest itself in a cold, dry, theological or philosophical treatment of the scriptures, as though given to exercise the intellect rather than the heart and the conscience'. The old saying is true, isn't it? That 'If you have only the word of God you will dry up. If you have only the Spirit of God you will blow up. But if you have both you will grow up'. One writer says that in too many places the Bible is being thumped and doctrine is being argued 'til 3 in the morning, but the Spirit, the Spirit of that doctrine is missing.

The second type of person I find in the New Testament is quite similar to that - it's the sentimentalist. You see, right throughout church history and right throughout the word of God there are always a little group of people and they look at one era of history as the time when God really shone. I don't know what that era of history is for you; I have my own. Many think it was the 1700s when Wesley and Whitefield were about. Many think it was the 1859 revival and times of refreshing then. Many think it was when Nicholson was in the province, when there were men who even stood in this pulpit in the early 1900s, 1950s. Many believe that that was God's era, that was God's time, and that God needs to come. Some of those people even try to emulate or 'conservate' that era in history.

If you went to North America today - maybe some of you have been, maybe some of you have seen this - there's a group of people called the Amish people. Maybe you saw them in the films. They have long beards, they wear sackcloth, they wear strange clothes, they don't believe in automobiles, they go into horses and carts. They don't use electricity. They don't believe in light because they believe that there was a certain time in history that was sacred, that was special, that was God-sent. In fact, there are two types of Amish people. There's the Button Amish people, and there's the Zip Amish people. The Button Amish people believe they are better than the Zip Amish people, because zips are modern and buttons aren't. That is the extent that they have got to - sentimental about an era of history. I want to encourage us today, because many are downhearted. Many, I believe, in the Christian community in Northern Ireland and even in our western community are down-hearted, are weary in the battle because years ago there were many more saved here than there are now.

Do we need to create that era again? Do we need to conserve that era here? Listen to the voice of God in Isaiah 43 and verse 19: "Behold, I will do a new thing". You remember when the church was born, and there was a man called Gamaliel - a wise man. Remember, Paul sat at his feet and learnt the Old Testament scriptures. But you remember what happened - that there was an uproar because of this church, like a flame that was burning through Palestine and going throughout the world. They were trying to stop it with arms, they were trying to stop it with philosophy, theology, everything - but they could not stop it. You remember Gamaliel's words - 'If this is of God, no man will stop it!'

Sentimentalists don't have vision. You remember in Acts 13:36 - what was written there? What did the preacher say? 'David, King David served his own generation well'. Can I say this? This humbles me. This frightens me because the only people who can reach our generation today, the only people who can show them Christ, who can bring them to Christ is not John Wesley. It is not George Whitefield. It is not D.L. Moody, or C.H. Spurgeon. It is David Legge. It is you, it is me, it is this church, it is the Christian church of today - they alone! Do we trust God to do a new thing?

There's the Second Adventists. There's the traditionalists, there's the sentimentalists, there's the Second Adventists, and I'm not talking about the cult now, but the second Advent is the second coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. We find them in the scriptures, in the book of Thessalonians. And really - to shorten the story - what it says is this: that they left their jobs, they left their occupations, they sat in a holy huddle and they waited for the Lord to return. Sometimes I hear that the Lord is coming back again, and praise His name He is coming back again! I believe more than that - He's coming back soon. But I honestly believe that some people have got so spiritually depressed that they believe that, because the Lord is coming back soon, that God cannot move. Praise God that our God can do anything, and our God is the God of the impossible. When men say 'no', He says 'yes'. No matter what we have in our heads, or no matter what doctrines we may form, God says He is sovereign, and God can work around our thoughts.

Then there is the pessimist. In Numbers 13 we find them, verse 26, but we haven't got time to go over that all - but a little chorus that the children sing goes like this:

'Twelve men went to spy in Canaan,
 Ten were bad,
 Two were good.
 What did they see when they spied in Canaan?
 Ten were bad,
 Two were good.
 Some saw giants tough and tall.
 Some saw grapes in clusters fall.

Some saw God was in it all:
Ten were bad,
Two were good'.

What do you see this morning? Do you see the giants that are ahead? Do you see the great machine, the great bulldozer of civilisation with all its evil philosophy, with all its paganism? What do you see? Do you see the dwindling pews? What do you see? Or do you see the clusters of grapes? Do you see what God can do? Do you see the vision of God? Do you see the power of God?

Do you listen in prayer meetings? Sometimes we can hear pessimists pray. They talk about what's happening in the world and the terrible things that are happening in the church. And, my friend, I don't know - that is right, that is true, but I have found from experience in my Christian life that the way God answers prayer, and the prayers that God answers is positive prayer - prayer that is praying with our hope in God. 'Why art thou downcast, oh my soul? Hope thou in God'. Oh, we must be positive in our prayers, we must be positive in our attitudes, and we must be positive in God. Are we stationary? Or are we visionary? Are we visionary? Do we have a vision that saves the people, that makes the church go on, that pushes the church on, that builds the church of Christ, that lifts the name of Christ, that lights up the world?

Naturalists recently have discovered that there is only one creature in the whole world that has both a positive and a negative lens within its eye. It is the chameleon. I don't know whether you've ever seen them on the television programmes, but they will sit still and all that will move is their eyes. There may be a bug that will come and land on a plant and, in one second, its tongue is out and it takes it. It is the only creature that has positive and negative vision in the whole world. Do you know what happens because of that? It is more successful in catching those bugs than any other. My friends, this morning, the secret of spiritual (and I use this term carefully) success, is in your vision, in my vision, in our vision, in the vision of the two spies - Joshua and Caleb. What did they see? Not the giants. They saw them, but knew that God was bigger than the giants. They saw the grapes, they saw the fruit that they could have, they saw the land flowing with milk and honey - but more than that: they saw their God!

We hear about the book of Revelation a lot, don't we? And we read it and we love it. But sometimes we often forget that the book of the Revelation was a letter. It was a letter written to people - the Christian church. And the reason was - one of the reasons was - that these Christians were dying for their faith, they were suffering for their faith. God inspired John the apostle to write them this letter. Why? To show them that while they were on the earth, while they were suffering, while they were bleeding and sweating for the cause of Christ, while their family members were being exterminated, there was another plan in heaven. There was God's plan and it would not be confounded. They on the earth could overcome that opposition, that persecution, through the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony. Why? Because God had another plan.

Do you see the earth? Do you see dwindling doctrine? Do you see decaying churches? Or do you see God's plan? Do you see God's vision? It would be amiss of me to preach this message this morning and not mention our blessed Lord. Because who is there, who is there greater in vision than He? That He had a vision before we could ever understand, before the worlds began, He had a vision of sinful humanity. He had a vision of redeeming people with His own blood for Himself. What did He do? It says He set His face 'as a flint' to go for that vision. He set Himself straight, He gave His life, He denied Himself, He did everything to get that vision. He Himself, as He hung upon that cross - we were hearing this morning - and as He shouted, "It is finished", He realised that that vision had been completed and accomplished.

Yea when He was on the earth - in Matthew and 16 verse 18 - He said this (and this is the vision I want you to take with you this morning): "I will build my church". No buts about it, no conditions about it - "I will

build my church". What He was doing was this: He was setting down a spiritual law that I want to leave with you today. It's this: that God will manifest Himself in direct proportion to your passion and your vision. 'If you seek me', God says, 'with all your heart, I will be found of you'. You and I - the Iron Hall assembly, its pastor, its elders, its deacons - will never know our potential for God until we step out and take risks on the frontline of the battle.

How do you know if you have vision? How do I know if I have vision? Let me ask you a few questions quickly. Ask yourself: are you concerned for dirty people in East Belfast? Are we concerned about people that don't fit in? Or are we secretly, deep down, glad a little bit that they don't fit in and we don't have to deal with them? Do we serve a certain class? Are we touching the untouchable for Christ? Or do we want God to clean the fish before we catch them? My friends, I want to encourage you today. Michelangelo, the great artist, was walking on his holidays in the city of Florence. He was walking down the street in his good clothes, and as he was walking down chatting to his friends, he saw in the corner of the market a great stone. He ran to that stone, and his friends didn't know what he was doing. He started chiselling away at the stone in his good clothes, getting them dirty, and his friends asked: 'What are you doing?'. He said this: 'I see an angel in that stone!'. There are many stones in our world today, but what do you see? Do you see an angel? Do you see what God can do? Do you see the power of God? Do you see the might of God? Do you see the saving ability of our God?

Are you like the shoemaker that went from the US of A to Africa as a missionary? His trade, of course, was making shoes - and when he went out there he sent a telegram back that he was coming back, because people in Africa didn't wear shoes. Another missionary went out in his place. He was a shoemaker, but the letter he sent back was entirely different and it said this: 'Send help for people here need shoes!'. What is our vision? Do you know what my vision for this place is? Quickly: my vision for this place - and I hope that we can say together, I believe that we can, and I believe that you have a vision - is that this will be a place of discipleship, that this will continue to be a place of fellowship, that it will be a place of worship, that it will be a place of the ministry of the word of God, and it will be a place of evangelism. And that it will be a place of growth.

Growth gets slated a lot today but, my friend, when God waters a plant, when the seed is planted what happens? It grows! I'd love to see it. Not specifically growing biologically - and by that I mean through birth, and through you having children, and eventually me having children - not geographically, that people shift from here to there and move from this church to that. It will happen. There's nothing wrong with it, but oh to see, oh to see growth biblically, where men and women, sinful, dirty, filthy men and women find Christ, find hope and find life.

The difference between a visionary and a stationary Christian is this: a stationary Christian sees things and asks 'Why?', but a visionary Christian dreams things and asks 'Why not?'. The poorest man - and I finish with this - on earth is not he that has no pennies, but he that has no dreams. Where there is vision, people are saved. May God bless His word to our hearts this morning.

Our Father, this morning we ask that every believer in this place would catch the vision of what can be done - we believe, what will be done - in the power of God if we would only step, step by faith into those great loving arms of growth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, give us each one today a vision of what You can do. For Christ's sake. Amen.

Transcribed by Trevor Veale, Preach The Word - May 2001

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"Bringing People To Jesus"

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If you have a copy of the word of God with you I want you to turn with me to Mark chapter 7. Mark's gospel and chapter 7, and we're beginning to read at verse 31. You know well, if you read the word of God and read throughout the Gospels, that they are full of the healing occurrences of the Lord Jesus Christ, where He healed men and women of various diseases, of various ailments that they had. In Mark chapter 7 verse 31 we find here again a record of one of these occurrences.

"And again, departing from the coasts of Tyre and Sidon, he came unto the sea of Galilee, through the midst of the coasts of Decapolis. And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech him to put his hand upon him. And he took him aside from the multitude, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spit, and touched his tongue; And looking up to heaven, he sighed, and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened. And straightway his ears were opened, and the string of his tongue was loosed, and he spake plain. And he charged them that they should tell no man: but the more he charged them, so much the more a great deal they published it; And were beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well: he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak".

I want to continue on from last Sunday morning, where we thought of the subject from Proverbs 29 and verse 18: 'Without a vision the people perish'. I tried to encourage you, I hope, in the Lord last Sunday morning to catch a vision of the need that there is, not just within the church, but in the world around us. I want to continue this morning by bringing a message entitled 'Bringing People To Jesus', bringing people to Christ - from Mark chapter 7.

But let us bow our heads quickly and quietly as we ask the Lord's help before we come to His word. Our Father, we thank Thee this morning for Thy word. We know that Thy word is truth and we pray, our Father, that Thy Spirit - the Holy Spirit of Almighty God - may wing this word home to our hearts, that He may fill us, that He may bless us, that He may encourage us and challenge us and speak to us today. But that most of all that we may have an encounter with God this day, in Jesus name we pray, Amen.

As we read this passage of Scripture together we see a unique encounter of a man who was incapacitated, a man who was helpless, a man who could do nothing for himself - physically speaking he was deaf and dumb. What that means for a person who is deaf and dumb, we who are not deaf and dumb can never really enter into, we can never appreciate that predicament. To be a person on this earth who cannot hear, who cannot hear the birds of the air, who cannot appreciate music, who cannot receive the communications of others who speak to them - and also, in turn, who cannot respond to those who are speaking to them - it is a terrible predicament to be in. Some people say that deafness is worse than blindness - you cannot communicate, you cannot express how you're feeling within, you cannot talk to others, you cannot have them talk to you. Yet this man in Mark chapter 7 was both deaf and dumb. What an awful life this man must have had!

We read, as so many times we read in the gospel accounts within the word of God, we read that on this day he met the Master - and from this day on this man's life was turned around. From this day on this man's life was turned upside-down, it was changed, every conceivable change for him was made by one simple meeting with the Lord Jesus Christ. You see it in verse 31 on, that his friends - and maybe you have friends like this, they love you, they care for you - this man's friends were so concerned about him, they were at the end of their tether as to what to do about this man's predicament, but they had heard, perhaps they had even seen, this teacher, this Rabbi from Nazareth and what He could do. They, out of compassion, out of love,

they took their friend and they brought him on the chance - as they saw it - that perhaps they could get near in the crowd to the Saviour, to this great Healer, and perhaps He could just reach out and touch him and heal this man's deafness and dumbness.

These friends of this man brought this man to Jesus. They brought him to Christ, why? Why could he not come to Christ of himself? Simply, as I've said, he was incapacitated. He could not communicate with people to ask them where Christ was going to be next, he couldn't speak to the disciples to hear where he could travel to to be in the front line of the queue to meet the Lord Jesus and to ask - he couldn't ask the Lord Jesus: 'Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me', this man couldn't say that. This man had to be brought to Jesus.

Now, friends, I don't even need to make the parallel this morning. There are so many people in our country, and in our area, in our vicinity, and they've gone to Sunday School, perhaps they've gone to church, and they know what it is to hear the gospel, to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ - but oh, I believe in the generation in which we are living: that may no longer be the case. There are people, believe it or not, in East Belfast and in Northern Ireland who do not know what the gospel of Jesus Christ is. They may have some kind of parody of it, they may have some kind of view of what a Christian is, the things that he does do and doesn't do, the things that he says - but they don't really have a grasp of what the gospel Jesus Christ is, and what it can do for their lives.

There are six lessons that I want to bring out shortly this morning from this passage of Scripture that we've read. They are six lessons, and six encouragements to us, about bringing men, bringing women, bringing boys and girls to Jesus Christ. The first thing that I want to emphasise to you is found in verse 32, it says: 'they brought unto him one' - they brought unto Him one. We live in an age, as I've already said, when church-going is not the norm any more. We have televisions, we have midi systems, we have videos, we have video games, we have so many things to keep men and women and boys and girls in their homes behind closed doors. Whereas, years ago, it was - dare I say it - even entertainment for ungodly men and women to come into a building like this, to listen to a preacher, to listen to beautiful songs, soloists, all sorts of things - it got them out of their homes and it brought them into a friendly atmosphere that they could enjoy.

That is no longer the case, and that is why we hear from Christendom today words like this: 'Gospel preaching no longer works', 'Gospel missions no longer work', 'The old-fashioned ways no longer work'. But the reality, I believe, is not that - the reality is this: that we no longer have people in our churches, in our halls, to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because people need to be brought, people need to be brought! The Lord Jesus in one of His parables said that you are to compel people, not to come into a church, but to come into the kingdom of God. You're to go to the highways and byways, you're to go to the four corners of the earth and bring men and women, effectively, to Jesus Christ.

This man was in great need. He was deaf and dumb. He couldn't communicate, he couldn't connect in a social way. He was pitiful. There are so many people in our society today and, spiritually speaking, they don't connect, they can't communicate, they are pitiful people. What do we do? Do we pity them? Do we look at them and bemoan their situation and their circumstances? Or do we do what these men did in verse 32 and bring them to Jesus? Why did they bring him? They brought him simply because, perhaps they had seen what the touch of Jesus could do, they perhaps had heard about it - and that's why they asked: 'Touch him'. They brought him to Jesus that he might be touched by the Master.

I saw recently, and read, an interesting survey. Now you have to be careful about statistics and surveys, but it said this: Gallup - who take polls every year - Gallup, every ten years with Princeton University in the USA, take research and a survey of people who go to church less than twice in a year - that is, excluding funerals and marriages. In their recent survey in 1988 they find this: that one third of Americans go to church, that

one-third of Americans lose the connection with church, and one-third have no Christian memory at all in their life. To that last third that have no Christian memory in their life, they were asked: 'Could they see themselves coming to church?'. 63% said yes, and they give two reasons why they would come - first of all because of spiritual interest. People today are looking to New Age, they're looking to cults, and there's something within them - I believe they're dead in sins, yes, but they have a gap that needs to be satisfied that can only be satisfied through Christ. But interestingly, the second group of people said that they would come if they were invited. If they were invited! Only 1 in 6, 1 in 6 of those people said that they had ever been invited to a gospel service or to a Christian gathering - and let me say this: 43% of that 63% were invited by Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. There are 20 million Baptists in America, and they only made up 10%.

Now, friends, I don't want to discourage you this morning, I want to encourage you to bring people to Jesus, to bring people to an atmosphere where they can hear the gospel, where they can hear words by which they might be saved! Their only hope of escaping an eternity in hell, but you must bring them!

The second thing I want you to notice is this: they prayed. You might say: 'Well, it doesn't look as if they prayed', but if you look closely it says: 'And they bring unto him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and they beseech', they besought, 'him to put his hand upon him'. Jesus Christ, the living God incarnate in flesh, they were asking Him a question, but they were praying, they were imploring, they were pleading, interceding for this man who couldn't intercede for himself - and they were pleading that Christ would touch him. We need to pray.

Now let me say this: if you look down this passage you might - if you're inquisitive - you might see that Jesus didn't just simply touch the man. What these men asked Him to do, simply touch him, Jesus didn't do - it says that He put His fingers in his ears, He spat upon His finger and He put it upon his tongue. That was not what these men asked to do. If you go throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament you learn a lesson, and it's this: that often, when we ask God for something, we often tell God how to answer our prayers. Think of Naaman, what happened Naaman? The servant girl came from Elijah and told Naaman what he was to do to get rid of his leprosy - go to the river Jordan and dip in it seven times and your leprosy will be gone. What did Naaman say? He said: 'The Jordan? A dirty river like the Jordan? What's wrong with the good rivers in Damascus? Why can't the man of God just come down to my house and wave his hand over me and I'll be well?'. But Naaman had to do what God told him.

What about Paul? He had a thorn in the flesh, we're not going to debate about what it was, but it was a thorn in the flesh, it was painful, it was troublesome to him. He cried to the Lord, it says, three times that the Lord would remove it, and the third time the Lord said: 'No! I'm not going to answer your prayer the way you think. My grace is sufficient for thee'. Do you remember Jairus' daughter? He wanted the Lord Jesus Christ to come and heal his daughter before she died, but Jesus went off and was concerned about other things. Before Jairus knew it his daughter, the message was sent back, had died! He thought the Lord Jesus Christ was neglecting his daughter - only to hear from the Lord's lips that this was to the glory of God that this had happened. But Jairus' prayer was not answered the way he thought it would be.

My friends this morning, we need to pray, and we need to pray that God will do His will - whatever that may be. We need to pray, not indicating to God the way we want our prayers answered, but we need to pray to Him that He will answer our prayers His way. Isn't it lovely, I think this is beautiful that you see in verse 32 and verse 33 that the Lord Jesus Christ took this man aside. Can you imagine the multitude that was thronging the Lord Jesus Christ? But Jesus took this man aside, because He is interested, He wants to be involved, He wants to be encapsulated by the lives of individuals. Jesus was not interested in the crowd in the sense of a PR stunt, but Jesus was interested in changing individual lives, and at times He did one individual at a time.

Do you remember that poor soul lying at the pool of at Bethesda? At that pool, remember it's said in the word of God, that the angel came down and he mullied the waters, and if you got in when the angel was mulling the waters you were healed. Can you imagine the amount of paraplegics, and diseased and incapacitated people that were around that pool? But it says that the Lord Jesus Christ went to this one man, and when He went and dealt with him, he went away. Why? Because He was concerned individually - it's not that He wasn't concerned for the rest, but He was concerned personally for this man and his needs.

The third thing I want you to notice: they were brought, they prayed, but the third thing is in verse 33: He touched. He touched! Jesus Christ, it says in the word of God, was a man of no reputation. Now what that simply means is this: that He did not try to make a great, famous reputation for Himself. In many senses He was not interested in public opinion, but I want to say to you this morning: it does not mean that He didn't have a reputation, it means He didn't have a great, fantastic one in the eyes of some people - but He had, in many people's eyes, a bad reputation because of the people He frequented and hung around. That was simply because the Lord Jesus Christ touched the untouchable. He touched the leper, He touched the immoral woman, He let the immoral woman wash His feet with her tears, and dry His feet with her hair. He touched the ones that no-one would touch, and He touched this deaf and dumb man.

He took him out of the crowd, perhaps to save him from the embarrassment that he had faced all of his life from his youth. It says that He brought him over, and He put His fingers in his ears - why? He was saying, He was demonstrating to this man: 'The deafness that you have, I am going to make you hear'. Then it says that He spat on His finger, and He touched his tongue to symbolise: 'The dumbness that you have experienced since your childhood, it's going to be loosed'. What was the ingredient within this man's life that made the difference? Simply this: faith. You might say: 'David, well he didn't say anything...I have faith'...and Jesus didn't ask him 'Do you have faith?', because the man couldn't hear' - but how do I know that this man had faith? Very simple, let me ask you question: would you let anybody spit on their hand and touch your tongue? This man knew who Jesus was, this man knew that Jesus was the one who could free him, that Jesus was the one who could liberate him - and he would let Jesus turn him inside out if He would only set him free!

Do we touch sinners? You read about General Booth, you read about a man who touched sinners and he revolutionised a generation because of it. Wesley, and his brother whose hymns we've been singing this morning, they touched a generation for Christ. They stemmed a very revolution in the whole of our country - why? Because they touched the untouchable, and they knew the power, they knew the dynamite of the gospel of Jesus Christ could change lives.

The fourth thing is this, verse 34 and 35: 'And looking up to heaven, he sighed', Jesus sighed, 'and saith unto him, Ephphatha, that is, Be opened'. I think this is tremendous: the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, God the Son - where was His source of power? Where did He get His strength? Where had He the power to change this man's life? The word of God says that He who was perfect - sinless, unselfish, undefiled, separate from sinners - He looked to heaven! Where do we look to? Do we look to Christians of bygone days? Do we look to ourselves and our confidence, and our abilities and our gifts? Do we look to our church? Do we look to evangelical Christianity? Do we look to authors? Do we even look to the word of God - and I hope you know what I'm saying when I say that - simply the word of God on its own? Or prayer on its own? My friend, the word of God is to show us Christ, to show us God, to bring us through the veil right into His very presence - but do we look to heaven? Do we look there for the power of God?

Duncan Campbell was a great revivalist of this century. Many years ago, in the 1940s and 50s, there was a move of God in the Isles of Lewis at the side of Scotland. I want to tell you this this morning: Duncan Campbell was a humble man of God. What happened was: as Duncan Campbell walked up those hills, full of the beauty of heather of the Scottish vales, he walked up that road to the little pink church, he walked

through those doors. Listen: there were no invitations, there was no publicity or posters - not that they are wrong - but there was a congregation bigger than you could ever imagine that the Spirit of God had invited. Duncan Campbell got to that platform, he stood there and he realised in his own helplessness that he couldn't say anything, he couldn't do anything. Do you know what he said? There was a young man sitting in the congregation who he knew was a man of God, and he asked him to stand to his feet, and he said: 'You lead the congregation in prayer, because you are nearer God than I am'. He stood to his feet, and the accounts say that he looked to heaven, and he prayed and he said: 'Father, I can see Your Throne. I know that Your Throne is there, and at Your right hand there is the Lord Jesus Christ' - and listen to what he said - 'and there's power there, let a bit of that power go and bless us!'.

My friend this morning, as he sat on the seat, people started falling down around him in conviction of sin and in tears. Do we look to heaven? The Lord Jesus Christ, of all people, if He needed to look to heaven, if He needed to take His strength from God, if He needed to pray throughout the night - how much more do we need to do it? But I must move on - there are many men of God that I could tell you about this morning: Matthew Henry, who prayed and studied from 8 o'clock in the morning to 12 o'clock. He had his lunch, he studied from 12 o'clock in the afternoon to 4 o'clock. He had his tea, and then he went out and did his pastoral visits. That's why we have his works today, because he spent and he wrote them in prayer before God. You could read about men like John Wesley who, when he reached into his eighties, into his 80th birthday, it says that he felt he had backslidden because he could no longer get up at half four in the morning to meet God, it was now 5 o'clock! Martin Luther, who shook the whole of Europe for Christ, he said he had so much to do some days [that he had] to pray for two hours. He had to pray for two hours because he had so much to do!

I believe today, that we are in the age of prayerlessness. We are in the age of prayerlessness. It may not be that we don't pray at all, but we pray little - and E.M. Bounds in his great book, 'Power Through Prayer', says that praying little is like a salve to our conscience, because we think we have dealt with God and it makes us feel alright the rest of the day, and we pray no more. A church in America that is here now, and thriving now, and changing lives - the minute it happened, and the change started to happen, and people were, in their multitudes, being born again, there was a preacher who was in the congregation. He was asked to stand on the platform and give a little word and share with the people, he was from Australia. He said these three statements: 'Look at your Sunday morning, and see how popular the church is. Look at your Sunday evening, and see how popular the Pastor is. Look at your prayer meeting, and see how popular God is'.

My friends, we need to pray. We need to pray more than ever. Jesus, when He prayed, He sighed it says. He looked up to heaven, He didn't just utter a prayer, He sighed. It was a prayer that had no words, the word of God records, but it was from the very depths of His being, it was a prayer of compassion, it was a prayer of feeling. He was showing - I think this is beautiful - the man couldn't hear a sigh, the man couldn't hear a prayer, but he could see the lungs of the Saviour fill and exhale in a sigh of compassion for him! The Lord let this man see that He loved him. We need to let men and women see that we love them, in our prayers, in our sacrifice. I believe this morning that the greatest prayer, the best prayer, is the silent prayer - it's the prayer that you can't even put into words that's welling up within your soul and in your heart, and all you can do is groan to God, as Romans 8 says, with groans that cannot be uttered.

The fifth thing, in verse 35, is this: He healed. They brought, they prayed, He touched, He looked, He sighed, but He healed! He had the power, no-one else had the power, the disciples didn't have it, we don't have it, He has it and it's for us! It's for us to use. He looked at this poor, pitiful man, and He said: 'Ephphatha', meaning 'Be opened'. That reception, he couldn't receive anything in his ear, that began to receive - and his response that he couldn't speak with, it began to respond. It says literally: 'The string of his tongue was loosed', the band that was tying his voice had gone and he was free! He was free.

'Hear Him ye deaf, His praise ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ.
Ye blind, behold your Saviour come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy!'

'My chains fell off!
My heart was free!
I rose, went forth,
And followed Thee'.

That is what the word of God says happened to this man, for in verse 36 and verse 37 it says that he went about declaring what the Lord had done, he published it. Now, that was disobedient, because the Lord told him not to do it. But my friend, I want you to see this - and I wonder, deep down, did the Lord know this? The change that was in this man's life, the joy that he had found, the peace, the freedom, was so great that he couldn't keep his mouth shut!

'They were all beyond measure astonished, saying, He hath done all things well'. Friends today, Jesus still does all things well. He can do it among us, He can do it in our personal lives - and we don't have to wait on it, He can do it now. May God bless His word to our hearts.

Our Father in heaven, we thank Thee this morning for the great truth of Thy word and the stories of Jesus that we love so dear. We pray that we would appropriate the truths of them in our lives, not just love the stories, but live out the truth. Take us now to our homes, and take us with Thy blessing, we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - April 2001

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"You Could Be Wrong!"

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We're going to turn to the word of God this morning, to Matthew's gospel. We're turning to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's gospel chapter 7. You remember this is when the Lord Jesus Christ ascended the Mount of Olives and began to teach the teaching of the kingdom of God. This was the teaching of the way things ought to be, the way things eventually would be one day, and the way Christians ought to try and live by the help of the Spirit while they are here upon the earth.

Reading from Matthew 7 and verse 1: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam", or a plank, "is in thine own eye? Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye". Verse 12: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets".

'Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank that is in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, Take the speck out of your eye, when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye'. Verse 12: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets'.

I read yesterday a very sad story of a fatal accident where four young girls were driving down a motorway, and the car crashed and they were all killed. Evidence that drink was the culprit was found in a broken whisky bottle, lying among the debris of bodies and blood that was found. In anger one of the parents, one of the fathers, was heard to say: 'If I could get my hands on the person that sold this drink to these young people, I would kill him!'. When that father went home he opened a cupboard in his room, the cupboard where he kept his drink - there he found a note in the handwriting of his daughter which said: 'Dad, we're taking along with us some of your good drink. I know you won't mind'.

Another story that I read yesterday was of a six-year-old boy who came home from school one day, and he brought home to his mother a note from the teacher in which it was suggested that that boy was taken out of school because he was too stupid to learn. His name was Thomas Alva Edison, the man who invented electricity. Another story I heard was about a young boy who was sent shopping to the grocery store. After he came home his mother realised that he hadn't brought back what she had asked for. So she phoned the grocer and she said over the phone: 'I sent my little son, James, to your store for five pounds of apples - and I find by weighing them that you have only given me four and a quarter pounds'. The grocer replied by saying these words: 'Madam, my scales are regularly inspected and corrected - have you weighed your little boy?'. All aspects of bad judgement - are we guilty?

The title of my message this morning is this: 'You Could Be Wrong'. I remember hearing Enoch Powell personally say these words, that when he gave that famous speech 'The Rivers Of Blood' that got many people's blood up, he said that he believed at that moment in time he was right. Someone asked him the question: 'Why did you make it? Surely you must have known in your mind, leaving the politics of it aside,

surely you must have known what this was going to cause and the reaction that this was going to give? Could you have been wrong? Or would you even admit that you were ever wrong in your life?'. Enoch Powell said these words that sounded very pompous, he said: 'I have never been wrong. I have never thought I have been wrong in a decision that I have made'.

Now whether you think Enoch Powell was right or not is irrelevant, but what he said was correct: because every time we make a decision, we think. We may be thinking wrongly, but we always come to the conclusion that what we have come to, and what we're about to do, is right. We make that decision. Now I'm not talking about sinning, because often we know that's wrong, but I'm talking about decisions that we really think through - and even when we are wrong we must, at the time, have thought we were right. It's a hard thing, isn't it, to - when you thought that you were right - have to admit that you are wrong. Could that be you today?

You know, there are notorious Christians - and I have personal friends like this, and I'm sure if you could think hard enough you could think of ones like them - they are deeply critical people, they criticise everything. As soon as you meet them the first thing that comes out of their mouth is criticism or censoriousness. The church they go to is too cold, the church they go to is too modern, the church they go to is too traditional, if you fall into sin within this church there is no-one there to pick you up again. The Pastor speaks too long, he is too short, they don't like the translation that he reads from. They don't like it if he shouts, they don't like it if he whispers. People who are critical. One Sunday the heat is too hot, the next it's too cold. The toilet door should be painted green, not blue. You've heard it all before.

Now, I'm not saying that we do not come to decisions, I'm not saying that we do not express our opinion - what I am saying is this: often a critical spirit betrays something more. I believe at times, in fact all the time, criticism is from sin. Many times people who have secondary issue agendas - in other words they make things more important than they are - often, do you know what this is? It is a mask, it is a way to cover over something that is wrong deep inside. When people begin to make secondary issues fundamental doctrines and hobbyhorses, I believe that there is a void within their life. There is a lack of a vital relationship with Jesus Christ, and because there is that gap in their life they have to put something else in it. So what they do is, they put within their heart a crusade for what they see as being good - a crusade for righteousness.

One of the easiest ways to cover our sin is to judge others. I believe today, that there could be people here, that there are people even among all churches that are met together today on the Lord's Day, and think of this: they are actually here, they have come through the door, they could be sitting where they are, and their eyes are open - like a bird of prey - looking for people who are doing things wrong. They could be looking for a wrong word, a wrong action, a wrong attitude, a mistake, what they see as wrong behaviour for the church of God.

Our mind, you know, and our heart is warped - and we thought of that a couple of weeks ago. Our heart is deceitful above all things - and do you know what I think at times? That when I am my most critical - that's what the devil tells me - that when I am at my most critical, and when I in front of people weigh things up and give my opinion (and sometimes it's very hard not to give your opinion) the devil tells me that at those moments I am my wisest, and I am I most spiritual. We all know, don't we, that the word of God teaches that the opposite is true.

The word 'prejudice' has been changed in meaning. The word 'prejudice' originally was a neutral word, it was a word that meant 'judgement beforehand, pre-justice' - someone who judged or gave an opinion on something before they had all the evidence. But it was a neutral word, it could have meant positive justice - that someone made a positive judgement, a positive conclusion, without the evidence. We all know, today, that that word has a negative meaning - and do you know why it has a negative meaning? Because we so often are so negative in our judgement that that word, in the English language, has lost its positive definition.

It could be good judgement, or it could be bad judgement. I want, from this passage this morning, to speak to you on good judgement, on bad judgement, and on tough judgement. Let's look at good judgement first of all. Now, as we read this passage in Matthew chapter 7, we see that the Lord Jesus seems to categorically say: 'Do not judge, or you too will be judged'. I want to tell you first of all what does not mean: that does not mean that every kind of judgement is wrong. If that's what it meant there would be criminals running the streets, the jails would be empty, and the place would be in chaos. That's not what it means. It doesn't mean, either, that we are not to judge things that people do to a certain extent - but what the Lord Jesus Christ is speaking about here is motive: motives for judging other people.

He says: 'Yes, there is a righteous type of judgement, but that type of judgement is meant to be expressed with careful discernment and not with a censorious spirit'. He said that in John 7 and verse 24, where He told the disciples and He told the people around Him: 'Stop judging by mere appearance, and make a right judgement'. You see, in order for this passage that we read this morning to make sense you must judge to a certain extent. We see that from verse 6 where He says: 'Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you'. Now, if you are expected not to cast your pearls before swine, you've got to discern, you've got to decide who are the swine and who are the ones that you should cast your pearls before. That requires judgement, but that is good judgement as opposed to bad judgement.

You see from verse 5 that the Lord Jesus Christ expects us to take the speck from our brother's eye, because He says to us that we can only see clearly to do that when the plank is out of our own. So, there is a time when it is good to judge, but you see that this judgement is positive in the way that we're trying to help the person that we are judging. How can we help that person is the issue that we are thinking about, if the thing that we are criticising in their life, if the thing that we're trying to help them with, we have problems with that thing too - or we have other glaring problems in our own life that everyone can see, or perhaps no-one can see?

Often we are guilty of the sins that we see in others. You see that in Romans 2 and verses 1 to 3, where Paul said: 'You therefore have no excuse, you who pass judgement on someone else - for at whatever point you judge the other you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgement do the same things. Now we know that God's judgement against those who do such things is based on truth, so when you - a mere man - pass judgement on them, and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgement?'. Do you know what we need brethren? We need prayer, and we need love, and we need to care for people. We need to show love and not criticism - even the God of heaven who is holy, who is all-righteous (we were singing about it in our first hymn), it is not primarily our sin that keeps us from God, it is His holiness! In light He is inaccessible, we cannot come near to Him - yet even He chastens us in love and not in anger.

I want to ask you today: could this be you? Could you be wrong? Do you have this spirit of a critical person? You need to deal with that today, and before God, and before the Lord's Table, and before an Almighty Creator, you need to deal with this. Believers today, you need to learn to discern - what I mean is: you need to tell the difference, and know how to tell the difference, between good judgement and a critical spirit. In some weeks time we'll be dealing with that subject: 'Learning To Discern'.

I want to turn our attention - we've looked at good judgement - but I want you to look at bad judgement for a moment today. What is that? Well He says in verse 5, He says to them: 'You hypocrites' - you hypocrites! Censoriousness, a critical spirit - they were criticising others for doing wrong, when they had wrong within their own life, and at times it was the selfsame wrong that was in their life! I heard about a Pastor who carried a book around with him, and every time someone came to him talking about another person, or criticising this or that or the other thing, he would open the book to him, he would give them a pen, and he

would say: 'Now, I would just like you to write that down in this book, and this is going in the foyer of the church. I just want you to write it down, write your name beside it, the date that you wrote it' - and you know what happened. No-one wrote in the book.

One of the stories in the Bible that gives me great comfort is found in John 8, and I want you to picture this for a moment this morning. The Lord Jesus Christ - now get this - He knew no sin, He did no sin, and I believe He could not sin. A woman is caught in the act of adultery - now that does not mean that she was an adulteress at the weekend, it doesn't mean that it was a rumour that was going about, it doesn't even mean that she confessed to that sin, it means that people found her in the sin! Straight from that sin she was found at the feet of Christ - can you imagine it? Can you imagine if a member of this church, by an outsider, was dragged into here and was brought before us, and it was told what they were found doing - how would they feel? More importantly: how would you react? What spirit would well up within you?

The Lord Jesus Christ, what did He say? Now I want you to get this: He said: 'Let him without sin first cast a stone at her'. That is the spirit of our Lord, that is the spirit of the Creator who became man, and came to earth to die and to save sinners. As He stood before this woman, He didn't stand before her as a judge, but He stood before her as her Saviour. We as His disciples, as Christ's ones, are to stand before the world, and stand before the church, not as their judges, but as their helpers.

A young lady was disciplined for breaking the church covenant, and after the Breaking of Bread one Sunday morning she was brought before the church. Some of the church suggested that she be dropped from the church roll, she was to be excommunicated. As the debate developed the Pastor stood, and he said: 'Let us also call the Church Treasurer and have him read the record of the giving, the financial giving of every member - and let us also vote to drop everyone who has violated God's law against covetousness'. Now listen, friend, this morning: there is no grading of sin - do you hear that? The smallest sin takes you to hell, the smallest sin would have had to have been put upon Christ, and the wrath of God put upon His own Son and poured upon Him - that would've had to been done even for the smallest sin. Don't grade sin today! Whatever you do, don't look at others, and don't look at adultery and fornication - even homosexuality, heinous as it is - don't look at that sin and turn to God and say: 'I thank God that I am not as that person' - because, in the sight of God, you were.

In Philippians chapter 2 we are told how to judge. We're told in verse 3 that we are to esteem each - now don't let this run off your head because you know the verse, listen to it: esteem everyone greater than yourself! Can you imagine if Christians did that? If you and I did that: thought of our brothers and sisters in Christ better than we are! But what do we do? We try to look better than they are. In Philippians 3 we're also told that we're not to compare ourselves with other people, we're not to strive to be as good a Christian as that person or the other person, we're not to look better than they are, we're not to try and copy other people - but it says that we are to compare ourselves with ourselves. In other words: the only judgement that we should be doing is our own judgement. We can hear the Holy Spirit saying: 'You forget about those people and, man, mind yourself'.

You see, we're to look at yesterday, and we're to compare yesterday with our life today. We're to compare ourselves with ourselves, and make sure that tomorrow we're better than the way we were yesterday. But in reality what we do is: we try to be better than someone else was yesterday. Steve Curtis Chapman has a song which is entitled 'You Know Better', listen to the words of it:

I saw you staring out your window,
Watch the people passing by,
Taking some notes on what you saw out there,
So you would know how hard you need to try.

I heard you are asking lots of questions,
And how in comparison you stand.
Please let me warn you to be careful' - listen:
'God wants our best, and not our better-than'.

Have you got that? God wants your best, He wants everything you can give, He wants His standard for your life - not someone else's standard! Therefore when we get that right in our lives, and we realise that God wants us to be ourselves, to be honest before Him, to live a life that is open before Him - not to look at those who are in the pulpit, or those in Christian books, or Christian service, and say: 'I wish I could be like them', or, 'I'm glad I'm not like him!'.

When William Gladstone was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, he sent to the Treasury for certain statistics on which he was to base his budget. The statistician that was drawing them up made a vital mistake but - listen - Gladstone was relying so much, and was so sure of, this man's accuracy that he didn't even take time to verify the figures. He went before the House of Parliament, before the Commons, and he made his speech based on these inaccurate figures. The speech was no sooner made, than the Press were able to expose the mistakes and Gladstone was shamed. You can imagine how he felt, he was embarrassed, he may well have been angry. He sent for that statistician to come into his office, and that man was terrified of what was going to happen - he had one of the highest jobs in the land. Gladstone looked at him and said: 'I want to congratulate you, Sir, for not making a mistake until now'.

Do we esteem each other better than ourselves? Or are we, on our own wooden pole with our own penknives, making marks of the faults of others - so that we ourselves, within ourselves, feel better than they do? Do we revel when someone falls into sin, and think: 'I'm glad it was not me. In fact, I would never do something like that'? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that that is taking delight in evil, that is not love!

The golden rule of every Christian is: rough justice. It is found in verse 12 of our reading, where Jesus said: 'So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you'. You can go to Buddhism, you can go to Islam, you can go to the cults, you can go across the face of the earth, but every religion admits that it has not a rule like this. Many religions have great teaching, but no religion says: 'Do to others what you would have them do to you'. Have you ever thought about those words? Have you ever really thought about what that means?

Philip Keller was a shepherd. He wrote a famous book on the 23rd Psalm: 'A Shepherd's Look at the 23rd Psalm'. He, in one of his books, described how he saw in the life of another person verse 12 of Matthew 7 carried out - how someone did to him what they would want him to do to them. I want you to listen to this as I read it. He says: 'For two weeks it had snowed off and on almost every day. I was beginning to weary of shovelling snow, cleaning giant cornices of snow off the roof, knocking snow off each block of wood carried in for the heater, cleaning snow from doorways and driveways. It seemed there was no end to snow, snow, snow. I even wondered where room could be found to pile the wind-driven drift. Then it happened: suddenly one day I came home, gingerly through the gathering gloom, to find that all the driveway, the sidewalks and even the doorways, had been shovelled clean. Stunned, I paused momentarily in the drive, and it simply seemed so good to believe. The bare pavement appeared almost unreal. The huge piles of snow heaped up on every side astonished me. Did someone with more strength than I care enough to come over and do this job out of a sheer goodwill and heartwarming concern? Yes, someone did. He did it with gusto, and I learned later that it was a young man from town, 10 miles away. With enormous energy and strong muscles he had moved mountains of snow on my behalf, and with this one gracious act of generosity he had not only saved my aching back, but he had broken the back of winter. In a warm and a wonderful way my spirit welled up with profound gratitude. What a lift our Father gave me through that young man's strong arms.

Then another evening the doorbell rang, and I went to see who was there. Cold wind tugged at the eaves and swirled around the door, and I opened it carefully to keep out the formidable frost. Standing there all wrapped up in wool cap, mitts and thick winter jacket, stood a neighbour. His bright blue eyes sparkled above crimson cheeks. 'Just brought you a wee treat', he muttered, pushing a covered basket of food towards me. 'I won't come in just now, too much winter', and he was gone. Softly I unwrapped the unexpected gift, it steamed a pungent and tantalising a fresh home baked meat tart, drawn from the oven only moments before. Beside it was piping a hot bowl of rich, dark gravy. What a feast! What a banquet to nourish one's body in the ice and sleet! Every mouthful of that delicious meal was relished, every particle of the pie was consumed with contentment, every drop of gravy was licked up with glorious delight. It was a meal that will be remembered to the end of my days. That night I curled up like a cat and slept for nine hours solid, I had peace and rest - deep joy - besides quickened faith in the gentle goodness of generous neighbours'.

In this weary old world it's good to know, isn't it, that there are still some sterling souls who really do know what it is to love their neighbours. Listen! This is Christianity: to love their neighbours as themselves. Why did you read those stories out, David? Because, going through your mind, you would probably think: 'Those are wee small things, insignificant things' - but to someone, when you do them, they mean so much.

Aesop's Fables are very famous. There's one of those tales that is about four bulls which were great friends. These bulls went everywhere together, they fed together, they lay down together. They were always keeping so close to each other, that if any danger happened, if there was something near them that could threaten them, they were able to face it together and they always overcame. But there was a lion, and that lion wanted to have them, and was determined at any cost to have them - but he couldn't when they were together. But he would watch, and daily as they would walk together there was always one bull that would tail off at the end. When he saw him he would run over to him, and behind him would slink up and whisper to him that the other bulls had been saying unkind things about him. The four friends began to become uneasy with one another, and each thought that the other was plotting against him. Finally, as there was no trust among them, they went off by themselves their separate ways - and their friendship was broken. This is what the lion wanted, and one-by-one they were killed, and he had four good meals.

Now listen today, and I'm saying this from my heart: the word of God teaches that Satan, as a roaring lion, goes about seeking whom he may devour. To the Christians who are tailing off at the end, who are slow behind, who actually think that they are the strongest - where in reality they would be offended to realise that they, indeed, are the weaker brother. He, day-by-day, is whispering in their ear, and the church of Jesus Christ is suffering from distrust of one another.

Do you judge? More importantly, listen Christian, do you love? Jesus said: 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples: if you love one another'. Perhaps you're here this morning and you've felt God speaking to you, and perhaps you know deep down that you do have a critical spirit, and that you are judging others. Well, listen: you will never ever grow as a Christian, and listen more importantly: the peace that God purchased for you at Calvary by the blood of Christ is being robbed from you by a critical spirit. Maybe you know that you've lost the joy of the Lord and you wonder why - let me ask you the question: could it be you?

Father, may the love of Jesus fill us as the water fills the sea, Him exalting, self abasing, this is victory. Father, we thank You for the Lord Jesus, we thank You for His teaching, we thank You for His example - that He was the summary of the law and the prophets, because He did unto others as they should've done unto Him. Sadly Lord, we scratch other people's backs when they scratch ours - but Father, we ought to be like Him, and when He suffered He only blessed. Lord, help us to make these changes, and help us to be more like Jesus. For we ask it in His name, Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - March 2001

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"Wisdom And Where It Leads - Part 1"

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I want you to turn with me to the book of Proverbs, the book of Proverbs and chapter 4, and I want to speak to you - I believe, hopefully by the guidance of God in the week that has gone by - upon the subject 'Wisdom And Where It Leads', wisdom and where it leads. You will know that the book of Proverbs, I hope you know at least, that it comes within a gamut of three books - the book of Ecclesiastes and the book of Job - they are not together in the canon of Scripture as we find them, but they are together in the thematic writings and the genre that they are of books of wisdom. We find that the book of Job, the book of Ecclesiastes, and particularly the book of Proverbs deal with the theme of what true wisdom is, and what we benefit and incur in our lives through having wisdom.

I'm going to read the whole chapter, chapter 4, Solomon is writing and he says: "Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble. My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee. Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil".

During my private reading in the study and my own devotions, and also in other studying matters I have come across one verse at the beginning of the week that really shot out at me on a number of occasions, and I felt that the Lord was leading me in some way to preach on it today. I wasn't exactly sure what the message was that God was wanting to bring, but I hope that throughout this morning's message some kind of a message will come to your heart that is applicable to you. Verse 18 is that verse, and it's very well known: 'But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day'.

The subject I take up this morning is 'Wisdom and Where It Leads To', and when you come to the beginning of chapter 4 of Proverbs you find that the writer of Proverbs, who we believe is Solomon, takes up this type of relationship and counsel between a father and a son. Any of you here this morning who are fathers, or indeed who have been sons, may recall a time in your life when your father put his arm around you and brought you into a private room, and sat you down and began to speak to you about the matters of life. That is exactly what we have here in chapter 4, it's a heart to heart between a father and a son - and it's a heart to heart between a father and a son in the same way as that father had with his own father, as his son.

Really what you have here in chapter 4 is Solomon saying: 'Now, son this is the advice that my father gave to me, and I'm going to give that advice to you and I want you to listen to it very carefully'. We ought to listen to it carefully today also, in fact I think it was Billy Graham who said many years ago that you should take one chapter of the book of Proverbs every day and read it and inwardly digest it - there are 31 chapters to this book, and as someone else said, I don't know who it was, a chapter a day of it will keep the devil away. There's great wisdom for the walk of the child of God in this book. In the book of Job we have the saint upon his back in illness and sickness looking up to God. In the book of the Psalms we have the saint upon his knees praying to God and praising and worshipping God, and coming to God with supplication and petition in his trials in his life. Here in the book of Proverbs we have the saint upon his feet, walking, living, and guidance and instruction and godly advice for how we ought to live our lives.

This just wasn't any ordinary father, and it was no ordinary son. Solomon, who is writing this book and giving to his son the advice of his father, had none other than great King David as his father - and we know what was said of King David, that he had a heart after God's own heart. I think we should listen today to a father who had a heart like God's heart. We should listen to a son who is now a father giving advice to his son who, it is said of Solomon, was the wisest man that ever lived - of course with the exception of our Lord Jesus Christ. So we have the wisest son, given advice by a godly father, and we are party to that advice today in the Scriptures.

Right throughout this chapter there is the sentiment coming through: 'Now, son don't forget this advice, and it will stand by you all the days of your life'. This is wisdom for life. If you get off a plane and you have a few minutes, maybe getting on the plane, to look into the bookshop you will see many businessmen lifting books about the A-Z of success in business. You will see parents going into bookshops, into newsagents, and buying magazines and periodicals to do with how to bring up children in the age in which we are living. You find managers, even football managers, bringing in psychologists to tell their team what it is to lead, to tell them what is to lead and to manage their particular sport. Everybody wants to know wisdom, wisdom for varied parts of their life, and the things that they want to do with success - they want wisdom, they want to be wise, not just intellectual, but have wisdom.

The question we as believers need to ask is: what is true wisdom? If we find out what true wisdom is, where does that wisdom lead us? Does it lead us to success? Does it bring us happiness and satisfaction, and peace and fulfilment in life? We find that Solomon in this chapter, and indeed right throughout the whole book, he personifies wisdom, he makes wisdom a person. He doesn't talk about wisdom as an 'it', he talks about wisdom in this chapter as 'her'. He makes wisdom into a woman. We find out as we go through the book that he also makes wickedness into a woman, he personifies wickedness as a woman also. As you look down the chapter, if you look at verse 6 you will see that Solomon says: 'Do not forsake her, love her, she will keep thee. Defend her, protect her, guard her'. Verse 8: 'Exalt her, and she will lift you up: embrace her, and she will honour you'. Verse 9: 'She will be wreath of gracefulness around your head: a crown of beauty upon your head and glory'. Verse 10: 'You will have long life if you obey my words'. Verse 12: 'Your path will be clear and open, you will run and you will not stumble if', verse 13, look at it, 'if you take hold of her' - wisdom - 'and guard her'.

He personifies wisdom as a wise woman. Then if you look at verses 14 to 17, we see the path of the wicked and how this son ought to avoid the path of the wicked. But if you go to chapter 5 and verse 3 particularly, he personifies wickedness as a woman of the night, as an evil woman: 'For the lips of a strange woman' - verse 3 of chapter 5 - 'drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a twoedged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell. Lest thou shouldst ponder the path of life, her ways are moveable, that thou canst not know them. Hear me now therefore, O ye children, and depart not from the words of my mouth. Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house'.

In chapter 6 we also find this, Solomon shows us a foolish young man who doesn't walk by her house, but succumbs himself to all her wooing and her wickedness and he is destroyed. So Solomon personifies wisdom and wickedness - it's as if he brings his son in, and he has a pep talk, a bit like a talk about the birds and the bees, and he sits him down and says: 'Son, these are the women that you avoid, and these are the type of women that you want to attract'. Spiritually, he is saying, you want to follow wisdom children, and you want to shun and avoid wickedness. It's almost reminiscent of the words of his father in the first Psalm: 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night' - and he goes on about how that person will have success and satisfaction in life, he will bear fruit, but 'The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away', and they shall not stand in the congregation of the righteous, but they shall incur the wrath and the judgement of God.

Of course David's great Psalm 119 tells us all about what true wisdom is: to follow the precepts, the principles, and the path of the word of God; to follow its teachings and implement it within our lives. I'm sure that it is said of most of us, if not all of us, that when we die and pass away we would long that it would be said of us: 'He was a wise man', 'She was a wise woman'. So we obviously ask the question: how can we be wise? What is the wisdom that Solomon is speaking of in this chapter and right throughout the book? Well, of course, one rule of biblical interpretation is to look at the context. We look in this book and we find that the answer to the question, 'What is wisdom?', is found in the book of Proverbs itself. In fact, it's found in this particular chapter and in verse 7 if you look at it: 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding'.

Now that seems a bit nonsensical, he's saying wisdom is to get wisdom, wisdom is to get understanding. If I can read it to you in the Amplified Version of the Scriptures which I commend to you for your reading and for your study, in chapter 4 and verse 7 it translates it: 'The beginning of wisdom is: get wisdom', and it defines wisdom - taking the Hebrew word and trying to really filter through the meaning that God is trying to get to us - 'wisdom is skilful and godly wisdom, for skilful and godly wisdom is the principal thing; and with all that you have gotten, get understanding', and it defines understanding as 'discernment', knowing what is right and what is wrong; 'comprehension', comprehending eternal things; and 'interpretation', being able to interpret the word of God and the ways of God in your life - that is godly wisdom. Again, if you look at verse 11: 'I have taught you in the way of skilful and godly wisdom, which is comprehensive insight into the ways and purposes of God'. Comprehensive insight into the ways and purposes of God.

Now, if you're familiar with the book of Proverbs, you will know from chapters 10 through to 29 we are given Solomon's wisdom in the secular realm in our lives, especially in interpersonal relationships. Solomon tells us that wisdom is what characterises people who are, essentially wise, but more so defining it as people who are righteous, people who are prudent, people who are good stewards - those in life who have understanding. He goes on: those who love discipline, those who love instruction, those who when you rightly reprimand them won't straighten their neck and harden and rebel against you, but those who will listen to your ways, and those who will correct their ways - they are the wise ones, those who when instructed and punished will receive more and more wisdom. In relation to the tongue he says that the wise person is the one who is restrained in speech, the one who is cool in spirit and does not lose his temper. But chapters 10 to 29 really deal with secular relationships of men and women, but in the chapter we're reading - especially chapters 1 through to 9 - we have wisdom in relation to God, and our relationship with God.

Look at chapter 3 for a moment, just turn over the page to chapter 3 - we read these words in verses 19 to 20: 'The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew'. Solomon is telling us that this whole universe, this world, was established in the beginning through the wisdom of God, by His wisdom He

made the worlds around us. If we are to come to wisdom and come to understanding, we must come to the One who created all things in wisdom, and who is the Author and Finisher of wisdom, the Alpha and Omega, the Almighty Eternal God. He created the worlds in wisdom, and so if we want wisdom and want to live wisely and fulfil our lives in wisdom, we must come to God for that wisdom.

If you look to chapter 2 and verse 6 you read these words: 'For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding'. So the first principle that we're laying down here is: if you want wisdom you'll not get it in a man's book. If you want wisdom you'll not get it at the feet of a man. You will only get wisdom if you come to God, who alone can give that wisdom. You might say: 'Well that's not a very accurate and fine definition of what wisdom is. I need to know more about what it is so that I can follow in this way'. Well, framing this book there is a definition of wisdom, right at the beginning of it and right at the end of it, that tells us what Solomon and primarily the Holy Spirit through Solomon is trying to get across to us in this particular book. Look at chapter 1 and verse 7: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction'. Verse 9: 'For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck'. And if you go to the last chapter that deals with a wise and prudent woman, and a good thing it is to have one of these women as your wife! Proverbs 31 and verse 30, he ends the book with the same theme and definition of wisdom, verse 30: 'Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised'.

What is wisdom? Solomon says, here's the definition: the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Now we're getting nearer: the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Now, that poses the question: what is the fear of the Lord? The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, well then what is fearing the Lord, and that will tell us what wisdom is. Most people think that godly fear and the fear of the Lord is some kind of terror, to be shaking in your boots - and there's a measure of strength in that interpretation, in the sense that when we go into the Scriptures, particularly the Old Testament and also the New, and we see what is called a theophany, when God appears to men in some kind of shape or form we find that fear takes hold upon them. We read of Moses that when he saw an image of God he hid his face and he was afraid to look upon it. We read of Israel that he was afraid of the fire and he didn't go up the mountain. We read of Elijah that he pulled his cloak over his face and he hid for fear of the terrible wrath and power of God. We read of Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6 that he fell down and he said: 'Woe is me for I am undone, I am a man of unclean lips!', and he feared. Ezekiel, in his vision in chapter 1, he fell down by the River Chebar as a dead man, and he feared because he saw some revelation of God. We go into the New Testament and we see the apostle Peter, and after he is ashamed at doubting the Lord's wisdom in catching the fish, and casting the net on the other side, he says to the Lord: 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man', he fears the Lord! John, in the book of Revelation, when he sees the great things that are still to come and he sees a great vision of the Lord Jesus Christ in all His glory, he says that he fell at His feet as dead and he feared.

Theologians have called this 'mysterium tremendum' (sp?), which means 'terrible mystery' - a terrifying mysterious fear. But that is not specifically what we are talking about today, but it has a relation because these men feared God and fell at His feet as dead not primarily because of the power of God, don't get that into your head, not because of the strength of God, the light of God, or even the very appearance of God because no man has seen God at any time - but get this: they fell and they feared God because of His awesome holiness! That is why men fear God, because when we get a glimpse of His holiness it automatically judges us so that no-one can behold His face and live - and the only way that we can react to the holiness of God, which is I think the primary declaration and revelation of His true nature and character, is to fall at His feet in terror and in fear that we would be destroyed.

So we're coming nearer to what the fear of the Lord is, it is this terror but it comes out in some kind of reverential awe. That, perhaps, is a better definition of the fear of the Lord: a reverential awe that expresses itself in the way that we live, in the uprightness of our life, in the devotion that we bring to God. We find this

in the Old Testament, that the fear of God is seen exclusively in a radical trust and worship of God, and a basic holiness in the child of God's life. Legally speaking in the land and with the law of God, the fear of God is defined as being obedient to the law of God. In the wisdom literature, in Proverbs specifically, and in Job and in Ecclesiastes, it's defined even finer and more specifically as the fear of God being our fundamental attitude toward God, and that attitude that leads us to wise behaviour, holy behaviour, and the avoidance of every form of evil.

So there we've narrowed it down: you're afraid of God's holiness, but what does that lead you to? Not running away from God, we run to God in Christ, but it leads us to a reverential awe that outflows in an attitude of devotion toward God, that leads us to worship Him by doing what He says and avoiding what He prohibits. Now the pre-requisite to that fear is humility. Humility is right throughout the whole book of Proverbs, because the fear of God and selfishness cannot come together - but the fear of God and selflessness are necessary companions. You hear a lot of talk today, and you'll read in these books about how to have wisdom and how to succeed in life: 'you need to find yourself, you need to find out who you really are'. You hear of these film stars going away into a retreat, and even philosophers, and they spend time alone just with themselves to 'find themselves'. But the book of Proverbs and the word of God is teaching us that true selfhood is to be found in the fear of the Lord.

Let me show you this, Proverbs 16, if you turn to it, and verse 18. Humility is a pre-requisite of the fear of the Lord, for Solomon says: 'Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall. Better it is to be of an humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud'. Humility and the fear of God must come together, and some of the most famous verses in the Scriptures teach us that. Proverbs 3 verses 5 and 6: 'Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths'. What the book of Proverbs, the book of Job, and the book of Ecclesiastes - the wisdom literature as a whole - are trying to do is to make us lack faith in our own decisions, in our own paths, and to place limits on human wisdom and what human wisdom is capable of accomplishing, and come to God for His guidance, come to God for His help and His wisdom.

This is a fundamental lesson for all of us as children of God to learn, and it is simply this: the door of wisdom is always shut in the face of a proud man or proud woman. Humility is a pre-requisite of the fear of the Lord, and the fear of the Lord is what wisdom truly is - and I think that is why our Lord Jesus Christ, after He had spoken and reprimanded His own people, He turns to God and He said: 'I thank Thee, my Father, that Thou hast kept these things from the wise and revealed them unto babes'. Remember His words: 'Except ye become as a little child and be converted, you shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven'.

What a lesson we have here today. To have wisdom means to fear God, to fear God you must be humble because God is the author of all wisdom and knowledge, and it will be the knowledge of God that will give you wisdom. The fear of God and the knowledge of God are two sides of the same reality. Now listen today, I'm not going to have time to even get to the verse that I've been led to this week, and we're going to have to deal with it next week, but let us finish on this note: do we know real wisdom? We'll deal next week with where that wisdom leads us, but do we know real wisdom? The best definition, in my studies this week, that I came across of wisdom and what the fear of the Lord truly is is given by Gerald H. Wilson, and he says this: 'The fear of the Lord is no abject terror, and nor is it simply reverential awe, but it is a deep-seated humility, grounded in an abiding awareness of one's absolute dependence for existence on the undeserved mercy of the Lord. Only through such humility and dependence is the human heart prepared to perceive and receive the wisdom that God gives'. Let me give you that again, for it's tremendous and it's important that you get it, what is it? It is a deep-seated humility, humble, poor of spirit, grounded upon an abiding awareness - totally in your mind and in your heart at all times is an awareness of absolute dependence for your very existence on, not just God, but the undeserved mercy of God. And only a heart like that, full of humility and dependence, is prepared to perceive and receive the wisdom that God gives!

That, in a nutshell, is the teaching of the book of Proverbs, and it is not unique to the word of God. For if we turn in closing to James chapter 1, we see the Holy Spirit reciprocates these spiritual truths in the book of James and chapter 1, reading from verse 5: 'If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God', there it is, you're not going to ask of God unless you know that you lack wisdom, if you think that you're wise you'll not even come to God - but the man who prays is the man who knows his utter dependence on God. We need to ask ourselves today: what is our prayer life like? Does it show and communicate to others and to God our absolute dependence upon Him? 'Let him ask of God that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him', for God is the One who gives that wisdom, 'But let him ask in faith'.

I think, perhaps, the best definition of the fear of God in the Old Testament is the Greek word 'pistis' (sp?) in the New Testament, which is the word 'faith'. Isn't that what it is?

'Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling,
Naked come to Thee for dress,
Helpless come to Thee for rest.
Foul I to the Fountain fly,
Oh, receive me or I die!'

Dependency, a desperate dependency on God that throws itself on God. 'Let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed' - if you want wisdom you need faith, 'For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord', if he doesn't ask in that total dependence upon God, for 'a double minded man is unstable in all his ways'. Do you want wisdom? Do you want wisdom in your workplace? Do you want wisdom in your family as a father or a mother, as a husband, as a wife, as a son, as a daughter? Do you want wisdom in your studies? Do you want wisdom for direction in your life? Do you want wisdom for the partner that God would have you be with for the rest of your days? Do you want wisdom, elders, for the leadership and the direction that God would want us to go in the future in this place? Go to God, for God alone gives wisdom, and it will be that utter dependency upon Him that will impart from Him wisdom that upbraideth not and is liberal! We'll look next week at where that wisdom leads us.

Let us bow our heads, maybe there's someone here today and you don't know salvation as your own and personal gift, received of God by faith. You're depending on yourself to get into heaven, or you're depending on a church, or maybe you're depending on Jesus but you've never really accepted Him into your life and His claims, and you've never had that conversion experience. Do you know all that the conversion experience is? Finding in yourself nothing, and in Christ everything, and casting yourself on the mercy of God in Christ and His cross for salvation - that's all it is. If you rely on anything in yourself you'll be damned, but if you're relying wholly, and depending and trusting in Jesus and His precious sacrifice, you will be saved.

You know, believers, what saved us is the thing whereby we're meant to live: by faith, isn't it? A total and utter dependency on God that reveals itself in our attitude to others and the way we live. Father, we thank Thee that in our need that we could not meet ourselves, You found us and You sent the Lord Jesus Christ to save us. We thank Thee that true wisdom can only be found in Him who is the personification of wisdom, the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, we pray that we will follow Him, that we will obey Him, that we will trust in Him, and that we will fear Him; that we will be humble people, and that we will look to heaven continually for all that we need, that we will declare our total and utter dependence on the mercy of God that is undeserved. Lord, that we will live with poor spirits in the richness of what it is to fear the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. Amen.

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"Wisdom And Where It Leads - Part 2"

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I want us to read the word of God together, if you would turn with me in your Bible to Proverbs chapter 4. You'll remember that last week I began a sermon which ended up as a series of two weeks, because we didn't get it finished, and really last week we looked at the subject of wisdom in the book of Proverbs, and indeed generally in the whole of the word of God. We were looking specifically last week at where we get wisdom, where wisdom comes from, and what it is in the definition that we have in the word of God. We're going to look this week, we'll recap a little on what we looked at last week, but we're going to look specifically this week at where wisdom leads to - last week, where wisdom comes from; this week, where wisdom leads to.

We'll begin at verse 1 of the chapter, chapter 4: "Hear, ye children, the instruction of a father, and attend to know understanding. For I give you good doctrine, forsake ye not my law. For I was my father's son, tender and only beloved in the sight of my mother. He taught me also, and said unto me, Let thine heart retain my words: keep my commandments, and live. Get wisdom, get understanding: forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her. She shall give to thine head an ornament of grace: a crown of glory shall she deliver to thee. Hear, O my son, and receive my sayings; and the years of thy life shall be many. I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee in right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Take fast hold of instruction; let her not go: keep her; for she is thy life. Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away. For they sleep not, except they have done mischief; and their sleep is taken away, unless they cause some to fall. For they eat the bread of wickedness, and drink the wine of violence. But the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day. The way of the wicked is as darkness: they know not at what they stumble. My son, attend to my words; incline thine ear unto my sayings. Let them not depart from thine eyes; keep them in the midst of thine heart. For they are life unto those that find them, and health to all their flesh. Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee. Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil".

We know that God will bless the reading of His word. Verse 18 of chapter 4: 'The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day'. You will remember that at the beginning of this chapter, as we said last week, it is a father speaking to his son, a father bringing his son under his wing into the private place - maybe into his study or to his knee - and giving him the advice that his own father gave him, and telling him that: 'Look, this is the wisdom that my father gave me, and if you obey that wisdom it will stand by you, and you'll have good success in your life if you take this advice'. That is largely what the book of Proverbs is - a lot of people take verses out of the book of Proverbs as promises, and that's not strictly the case because the book of Proverbs, primarily, is a book of godly advice, godly wisdom of a father to his son. The reason why we know that is, there are some apparent contradictions in the book of Proverbs, some advice is given for one situation and different advice is given later on in the book for the same situation - but really, what it is saying is that there are different elements to each situation that may determine different responses by the child of God, and a lot of it is left up to the discernment and the wisdom of the child of God to know how to behave in which circumstance. It is a book of godly advice, and we do

well to note it, we do well to read it, and you should try if you can - I'm trying to do it at the minute - to read one chapter of it a day, 31 chapters, one for each day of the month. There is great wisdom within each verse, let alone each chapter.

Perhaps the primary theme of the whole book is wisdom, and what true wisdom is. The verse that we're looking at today tells us not only what wisdom is, but where wisdom leads to. Last week we looked at wisdom and how Solomon actually personifies it. If you look at verse 6 and following, he speaks of wisdom in the feminine - 'she' - he personifies it as a woman. It's as if Solomon is speaking to his son and saying: 'Now this is the type of woman that you want to get hold of, and this is not the type of woman that you want to be associated with' - and we see that later on the book he also personifies wickedness as an evil and adulterous woman in chapters 5 and 6 especially. So he's saying: 'Son, now listen, follow this woman, this wise woman, look for this godly woman, and she will stand by you. If you reverence her, if you love her, if you hold her and cherish her, you will be successful. But if you follow this wicked woman, wickedness personified, it will destroy your life and ultimately it will destroy your soul in hell'.

Now, we looked last week at the definition of wisdom that we have in this chapter, verse 7: 'Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom'. He's saying: 'The wisest thing to do, and how you will have wisdom, is to get wisdom, and get understanding with that wisdom'. If you turn to chapter 9 and verse 10, you have another definition that we found last week - what exactly is wisdom if we were to define it specifically? Chapter 9 verse 10: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding'. Now you know that in chapters 10 through to 29 you have wisdom in the practical and in the secular realm where we relate to one another, and we saw there how if you love discipline, if you love instruction, if you like to be instructed and even punished when necessary, you are a wise person. If you're restrained in speech, if you're cool in spirit, if you're not lazy, you're a wise person.

But here we have a definition of wisdom specifically relating to God, and that's what the first nine chapters of this book of wisdom are all about. Wisdom related to God is the fear of God, wisdom related to God is understanding the things of God, and wisdom specifically is the knowledge of the Holy, the knowledge of God. Now we established last week that the only place that you get wisdom is from God. We saw that God created this world by His wisdom, and He is the only giver of wisdom, and if we are to have wisdom we are to get that wisdom through Him. The whole framework of this book from beginning to end is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What is the fear of the Lord? I'll give you the definition that I give you last week by this man Gerald H. Wilson - I don't know who he is, but he gives a good definition of what the fear of the Lord is: 'The fear of the Lord is no abject terror, nor is it simply reverential awe, but a deep-seated humility, grounded in an abiding awareness of one's absolute dependence for existence on the undeserved mercy of the Lord'.

Now that's a mouthful, but what's he really saying? It's this: the wisdom of God is the fear of the Lord, which says 'I am humble, I am nothing in Your sight O God, I have nothing to offer you, I have nothing in my life that can take me through life's problems and help me to cope, and if I'm to have anything for a day or for eternity in salvation I need to get it from You'. A humility that is an abiding constant awareness of our absolute dependence and existence on the undeserved mercy of the Lord. If it was not for the mercy of the Lord we would not be here, if it wasn't for the mercy of the Lord even those who are unsaved would not be breathing the blessed air that God gives, God would wipe the whole fallen race of humanity out - we are totally dependent upon His grace and His mercy. Gerald Wilson goes on to say: 'Only through such humility and such dependence is the human heart prepared to perceive and receive the wisdom that God gives'.

What is this wisdom and where do we get it? We get it from God. What is it? It is the fear of the Lord. How do we know the fear of the Lord? Well, you need to get humble, you need to get totally dependent upon God and cast yourself on His mercy, and only a spirit that is poor like that will be able to perceive - understand -

God's wisdom and receive God's wisdom when He gives it. We saw that that's what James 1 tells us, that a double minded man is unstable in all his ways. God wants to give us wisdom, and He will give it to those who ask of Him in faith. What is the fear of the Lord? It is this humility, total dependence upon God that is defined in the New Testament by the Greek word 'pistis' (sp?) which means 'faith'. The wisdom of God, the fear of the Lord, is faith. James said any man that asks wisdom of God without faith, let him not think that he will receive anything from God - but if a man ask in faith, he will receive of God that giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.

Wisdom and where we get it - but we ask, today, the question: what is the result of a life of wisdom in the fear of the Lord? What happens when you live like this? Does it pay off? Solomon says: 'Son, if you live like this it'll stand by you, take wisdom to you and she'll bless you, she'll help you, she'll make you succeed' - is that the truth? Is that really the case, and where does this wisdom lead to? Let us be under no illusion, in this world in which we live this wisdom is classed as absolute foolishness. If you turn with me for a moment to 1 Corinthians and chapter 1, in verse 18 Paul says: 'For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God'. Verse 21: 'For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe'. Verse 23: 'But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness'. Verse 25: 'Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men'.

Now let's lay down as the foundation right away that you are going to be seen as absolute fools for obeying and having God's wisdom in your life, for the world outside does not understand, does not perceive or receive the wisdom of God - for it is spiritually discerned. They cannot know it without the Spirit of God, and in fact they cannot have that humble contrite spirit unless the Holy Spirit works with them and makes them realise that it's not through their own righteousness, it's not through their good works, it's not through going to church, it's not through a moral code, but it's nothing but the blood of Jesus that can cleanse us from our sin. It's foolishness for them to say: 'Have faith in the blood of a cross, a Man dying, an execution? Sure it's a curse for any man to die on the cross' - this just doesn't make sense to them.

Now, what is the reason? I've told you a little bit, but Paul goes on in chapter 2 and verse 14: 'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned'. He doesn't have the Spirit of God, so he can't receive God's wisdom. Chapter 3 and verse 19, again he tells us the reason why: 'For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness'. What this world thinks is wise is nonsense and foolishness to God, and what God thinks is wise is nonsense and foolishness to the world. So immediately you take the wisdom of God, you are opposed face-to-face, nose to nose, tooth to tooth and nail to nail to this world and everything that this world stands for.

Like Athanasius, who said: 'If the world is against Athanasius, Athanasius is against the world'. We're opposed to this world and this world's system, our way of the cross, the idea that through crucifixion we are redeemed, makes us fools for Christ's sake. Really in the world, the spirit that there is concerning our wisdom is the spirit that you find in 2 Peter 3 verse 4 concerning the second coming of the Lord, where they say: 'It's not like this at all, men have been saying this for years, where is the promise of His coming? You say He's coming, but we can see that that's foolishness. You've said that for years but He hasn't come, and He's not going to come!'. We feel like Isaiah: 'Who has believed our report?', and maybe there are even times - and this is who specifically I'm wanting to address now - there may be times even in our hearts as believers that we begin to doubt, we begin to ask the question when we're squeezed hard in life's difficulties and circumstances: 'Does this really pay? Is this way really worth the pain, really worth the effort and the stress?'. We feel like David - it seems that wicked people are succeeding in life, those who are breaking all the rules are going to the top and those who are obeying and trying their best to walk in God's path and righteousness are being penalised for it.

In fact the godly prophet Jeremiah said exactly that in chapter 12 and verse 1 of his prophecy: 'Righteous art thou, O LORD, when I plead with thee: yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments'. 'I've got a bone to pick with You, Lord. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? And wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously? Lord, have Your judgements broken down, has Your way of wisdom and dealing with men, has it met a brick wall? Have You changed how You operate now, and Your principles, and Your system of working and dealing with human beings?'

Well let us look at our text, and I want to read it another version that really outlines the full gamut and meaning and wealth of the text. I'll read it in a couple of translations - listen to this: 'The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day'. Literally it means 'standing firm of the day', the sun standing firm of the day, the noontime when the sun's at the highest peak, that is like the walk in the path of the righteous - it gleams, it starts when the sun rises, and then the sun and the rays begin to flow out into the whole day, until the sun gets at its peak and then after noontime it starts going down - but the righteous life is like that sun that continues to go on and on and on, not till night-time, but until the perfect day!

Goodspeed translates it like this: 'The path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn, that shines ever more brightly until the day is full'. Rotherham translates it: 'The path of the righteous is like the light of the dawn, going on and brightening unto a more radiant day'. What an illustration Solomon uses to his son to show him that it does pay, that when you're born again and when you have true wisdom, and coming to faith with the Lord Jesus Christ - it's like the dawning of the day, it's like the sun coming up. As you go along that path of godliness, the narrow road, you find that the light starts to radiate right throughout all your days, and all your experiences, and all your habits - your words, your thoughts, and your deeds - but Solomon says it doesn't stop there, and it's not like our 24-hour day, when the sun reaches its peak it starts to come down again, but that light, that life that is eternal goes on and on and on until the perfect day of eternity when it radiates throughout the whole universe. 'It shineth more and more unto the perfect day'.

Now let me say to you: if you take the wisdom of God and you trust not your own understanding, but in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path; you trust in Him and cast your cares upon Him; you humble yourself and recognise that you're totally and utterly dependent upon His mercy alone, you will perceive His wisdom and receive His gift of wisdom, and your life will go on and on like this until the perfect day as a path of ever increasing light.

First of all, there's three things I want to share with you that will happen if you take this wisdom: life's path for you will be a shining light. Christ said of Himself: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life'. If He is the way and we follow His way, He has also said: 'I am the light of the world, he that believeth in me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life'. So if He is the way and we walk along His way, our life will be a shining light, we will receive the true wisdom of God, we will even receive it from the word of God that David said is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our pathway. In the New Testament the apostle says that we ourselves, as believers, are light in the Lord. Because we've been given light through regeneration and being born again, because we walk in the light and obey the light, we become light - we become little flames of the light and life of the Lord Jesus Christ to a world around us. The Bible says that they will see our shining light, and they will glorify our Father in heaven because of our good works in this dark and perverse, adulterous generation.

Can I address anybody in this gathering now who does not have that light? Maybe you're still in darkness, you're still walking in dark ways and dark deeds, you're still having dark thoughts in the recesses and dungeons of your mind and heart that no one knows about, perhaps you're committing things in dark places that no one knows about! You've never been converted, you've never had the light shined into your heart.

The negro spiritual used to go: 'I saw the light, I saw the light, no more in darkness, no more in life' - and it's true! Has the light dawned on your spirit? Have you come into a knowledge of your awful sinfulness before God, and of your need for salvation through the blood of the Lord Jesus alone? If you haven't you're walking in darkness! You will enter, one day in eternity, outer darkness forever in hell! But the way of the believer is: if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship the one with the other - that means us with God, the fellowship that was broken when we sinned. We have fellowship with one another when we walk in the light, and the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin! Will you come into the light? Believer, even, will you start walking in the light and let the radiant holiness of God's presence start to uncover your sinfulness, and the black darkness, and even the very little particles of dust that are in your life that are preventing fellowship of God - oh, would you let the blood of Christ cleanse them all?

If you take God's wisdom and have faith in Him alone, life's path for you will be a shining light. The second thing is this: life's path will be a progress of a growing light. Life will be a progress of a growing light - you see in verse 18 Solomon insinuates that there's a progression here. It comes up, the sun, at dawn; and then it gets higher and higher and higher, and you watch it moving until it's at its highest peak in the daytime - but there's a progression there. Solomon is saying that when you walk in the way of wisdom, and when you take God's word, and God's ways, and God's salvation, and you walk by faith in them - you will progress as a child of God. The converse of that is: God does not glorify in the stunted growth of His children, but God is glorified when we walk in the light and grow into a more brighter light, until the perfect day.

In case you think that I'm reading New Testament truth into Old Testament verses I want you to turn with me to Philippians chapter 3. If you like, this is Paul's motto that we know all too well, and he says that the desire of his heart in verse 10 is: 'That I may know him', what did Solomon said in chapter 9 of Proverbs, verse 10? That wisdom is the knowledge of the Holy. Paul is looking for wisdom here: 'That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead'. That's a tricky verse, Paul the apostle asking that he would attain unto the resurrection of the dead - what hope have we if Paul was praying like this? What makes him pray like this? Well, look at the next verse: 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus'.

Now I'll explain the difficulties in this in just a moment, but what I want you to see is this: Paul's prayer for his life was that it would be a progression. Forget what's behind and press forward unto that light that shines as a perfect day. Six hundred years ago an unknown saint of God wrote a book called 'The Cloud of Unknowing', his premise in the book was that most Christians live what he called a 'common Christian life', they are 'common Christians', he says. While there are other people, they're a little step upwards, and they live a life of 'special Christianity'. Then there's another realm, they're a bit above the special ones, and they live a life of 'singular Christianity'. Then there are a people that are very few, and they live the life of 'perfect Christianity'. Now I would happen to differ with this brother, because I think what he calls 'perfect Christianity' is the normal Christianity, and ought to be the common Christianity for us all because God has given us the power and the ability to live it. But when he talks about perfect Christianity he says this: 'The first three of these stages - common, special, and singular - may be begun and ended in this life. You can enter into perfection, the fourth stage, but you cannot enter into it fully, because the fourth may by grace be begun here but it shall last without end in the bliss of heaven'. Have you got it? You can begin the path of biblical perfection now, but it will never be consummated and finished or finalised until we are in eternity.

Now when I talk about perfection, am I saying that I'm perfect, or you're perfect, or that we can begin to be perfect? Our sense of perfection is not the biblical sense of perfection that we have in the word of God. Look

back at Philippians 3 just for a moment till I explain this, and I think that this is the answer to the question that Paul poses: 'I want to know him, that I might attain' - verse 11 - 'the resurrection of the dead'. Now look at verse 12: 'Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect'. Now look at verse 15: 'Let us therefore, as many as be' - what? - 'perfect, be thus minded'. Is he contradicting himself? He can't be, because the word of God doesn't contradict itself - but what he is saying here, I believe, is that you can enter into such a life of fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ that will be begun down here and one day will end in glory! It's a progression, upward and onward! It's not common, where we just get saved and get stuck; it's not even just singular, where we live and do all the right things, and live some kind of substandard holy life; it's not even special, but it begins and enters into a being changed and conformed to the image of God's Son, until one day - it doesn't stop in time - but it enters into eternity and shines more and more until the brightest day.

The Psalmist said in the Psalm that we studied a few weeks ago, Psalm 84 verse 7: 'They go from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appeareth before God'. Listen to what Charles Bridges said about this wonderful verse, a great evangelical in the Church of England over a hundred years ago: 'It is a beautiful sight to see the Christian thus rising out of the darkness; not, indeed, with uniform brightness but deepening from the first faint beginning of his course, rising higher and higher, widening his circle, advancing onward with increasing brightness unto the perfect day. Knowledge, faith, love, holiness irradiate every step'.

Now what does this verse do for us? I'll tell you what it does: it rebukes a stationary profession in Christ. If you're going nowhere at this moment, be rebuked, because God has done everything in His power to make you progress brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. It's meant to be a rising, it's meant to be an advancing - and it's certainly, even if you're not stationary, it cannot be a declining! You're not meant to go backward! Therefore it rebukes not only the stationary Christian, but the backsliding Christian. I'm not saying that we don't have a blip here and there, for even David and Peter had a cloud temporarily that came across the sun of righteousness for them. There were those who were in the day of small things, and were told not to despise the day of small things - and I think perhaps we're in them in this present day in which we live - but it says this to us: don't be satisfied with whatever you have! Are you satisfied with the blessing in the Iron Hall? I'm not! Are you satisfied with the reality of God in your life? I'm not! I want to go on and on, onward and upward, higher and brighter until the perfect day radiates in my heart! Shining and progressing light, continually aiming at perfection and completeness in the Lord Jesus, pressing on till we shall shine forth as the sun, Jesus said, in the kingdom of His Father.

Thirdly and finally, added to that - not only will life's path be a perfect light, and life's progress will be a growing light, but life's destiny will be a perfect light. What did Paul say in 2 Corinthians 3:18? 'We all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord'. Peter talks about this in 2 Peter 1:19: 'We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts'. Peter is talking, of course, about the Lord's second advent, His return to this earth. That's external, but he says 'the day star arising in your heart', that's internal. It was to Peter that these mockers and doubters said: 'Where is the promise of His coming?', and Peter says: 'There's a day coming when all the darkness of doubts and depressions will be cast away by the radiant light of Jesus Christ coming into the world'. But listen, that day star won't just arise on the scene of human history, but it will arise in your heart to dispel the darkness of doubts and despondency!

Isn't it wonderful? We have the perfect Scriptures, but you know they're limited - I hope you know they're limited - but one day the perfect Scriptures will be replaced by the perfect and complete revelation of Jesus Christ Himself, and the world of eternity, one perfect day of ever-increasing light and joy, will begin and we will arrive at the end - the perfect day - and this is what we ought to be pressing onward toward! To the place where there shall be no night there, and they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light and they shall reign for ever and ever.

The world laughs at our foolishness, doesn't it? Our wisdom is foolishness to them. Sometimes in the depths of our heart, we cannot see the end, we cannot see where we are being brought to, we cannot see how this wise road will pay. Let me finish with this story. There was a woodcutter and he had a lovely white horse, and the people often admired it, and many people came and propositioned him to buy it - and they offered all the money they could. He was a very poor man, he could have done with the money, but he wouldn't give the horse up. He said: 'How can I sell a person? This horse is a person to me, I cannot part with him'. One day the old man got up and the horse wasn't in the stable. The people came round to his door and lambasted him: 'You're a fool, if you had sold the horse when you had him you'd be well off now - and this is a curse from God upon you, because you didn't sell it!'. The old wise man said to them: 'Don't speak too quickly, just say only that the horse is not there. That's all we know. We don't know why it's happened, we don't know what's going to happen, just say that the horse is not there'. Fifteen days later the horse returned, and it brought with it a dozen wild horses. The people came to his door and they said: 'Old man, we're so sorry, we were wrong, you were right - it was a blessing, it was a blessing!'. The old man said: 'Don't say it was a blessing, just say that the horses have returned. We don't know whether it's a blessing or not, just say what we know, that the horses have returned'. Well, that old man's only son tried to break those horses in and tame in. One day as he was training them he fell and broke both of his legs. The people came to his door again and said: 'We're sorry Sir, because you were right, this was a curse and wasn't a blessing - look what has happened to your son'. He said: 'Don't say it's a curse or don't say it's a blessing, just say what you know'. Weeks later the country was engaged in warfare, and that man's young son, only son, was bypassed because of his disability. They came to him again and said: 'We were wrong, it wasn't a curse, it was a blessing'. And again he said: 'Just say what you know'.

God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain. We don't know why things happen in our lives, and they may even cause us to doubt, but listen child of God: whatever happens, if you keep God's way of wisdom your life will go on and on as a shining light, and one day you will reach life's destiny - a perfect light! John said it: 'Every man that has this hope within him, purifieth himself even as He is pure'. I invite you all today to walk the way of wisdom, because the way of wisdom leads home.

Lord, we thank Thee that Jesus is coming again. We thank Thee that if He does not come in our lifetime that we will be called home to His side, and we will enter into that perfect day - the consummation of which we hope has been begun down here on earth, as we forget that which is behind and press on to that which is to come: the high prize of the calling of Christ Jesus. Lord, help us to run the race with all our might, to finish the course well. Oh what a day that will be, when we enter the perfect day. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - September 2002

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"Where Is God?"

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Turn with me to the 42nd Psalm, Psalm 42, and we've been singing about this Psalm already - and the verse on the front of your bulletin is from this Psalm also - and this is the Psalm that we're going to be thinking about for a few moments this morning. Psalm 42 and beginning to read at verse 1: "As the deer panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat", or my food, "day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar. Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Yet the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the day time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life. I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God? Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God".

Let's come before the Lord and ask His help, and bow before Him in a word of prayer. Let us pray: Our Father, we thank Thee for Thy word. We thank Thee that Thy word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our pathway - and our Father, we need Thy help as we come to it now. We do not want the words of men to be heard but, Lord, we long for the word of God to thunder forth in this place - and yet with the thundering of it, that the still small voice of the Holy Spirit may whisper to those who need to hear it. For we ask these things, taking the power of God for our own, in Jesus name. Amen.

Elie Wiesel wrote a book, the title of his book was 'La Nuit' (that's French - now I'm not much good at French), but translated it just simply means: 'The Night'. It was his autobiography of his experience in Auschwitz. And the story takes place in Buna, the camp that was allotted to Auschwitz, and it tells of a young Jewish man - in fact two, three young Jewish men who were hanged alongside of one another. They were hanged by SS officers in front of thousands of inmates, who were obliged to file past them - one by one - and stare fully into their faces as they hung there upon the ropes. The two adult men were dead, but the child right in the middle of them was so light that he remained still alive. And Elie writes in his book these words, and I quote: 'For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. We had to look at him full in the face, he was still alive when I passed in front of him - his tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me I heard a man asking 'Where is God now?', and I heard a voice within me answer him 'Where is He? Here He is! He is hanging here on the gallows'. That night the soup tasted of corpses'.

This man's experience in what we could term - it would be an inaccurate term - but we could term it the nearest thing, perhaps that this earth has ever experienced, near to hell on earth. When he looked at it, when he saw the suffering, when he saw the anguish, when he saw the pain that fellow man could inflict on their fellow human beings, he was forced within himself to ask the question: 'Where is God? Where is He?'. I wonder have you ever asked that question? Perhaps a situation in your own personal life, perhaps a situation of someone that you know about who is in a terrible turmoil, who is in terrible illness, sickness - whatever it

is - and you look at them, and you look perhaps on the television screen and you see the things that are going on in our planet - children that are like skeletons - and you cry out within yourself, you maybe wouldn't say it in church, you maybe wouldn't talk to your fellow Christians about it, but you ask yourself: 'Where is God? Where is He when this is going on? Is God dead? Is God really there? Is there a God at all?'. I wonder have you ever asked the famous question - three letter word that is probably the question that's asked by children all the time, but if we're honest with ourselves, as big children, we ask the question every day of our lives at times: 'Why? Why?'. Something inside us builds up until our emotions and our soul, our very inner being, cry out to man and to God, and ask: 'Why is this allowed to happen? Why is God letting this happen? Why is God even doing this? Where is God among all of it?'

Some would say that humanity is futile. Humanity is futile, all of this life on earth is totally worthless and pointless. The contemporary artist Francis Bacon believed that women and men were futile wretches, there was no point to any of it. He writes: 'Man now realises that he is an accident, that he is completely a futile being, that he has to play the game without reason' - there's no point to it at all. The French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre believed that because, as far as he was concerned, God did not exist 'life was no ultimate attitude at all'. Samuel Beckett conveyed that attitude, and conveyed that philosophy of life in his play 'Breath'. Do you know what the play was? The play consisted of 30 seconds, there were no actors, there were no conversations. The whole of the script was a simple sigh of human life, from a baby's cry to a man's last breath before he died. That was his summary of life. This attitude to life, this attitude that it is pointless, that there is no God in it, that God - if He even is there - is looking on as a spectator, laughing, He doesn't care about us - this philosophy of life is taking over our society today, and it can even lead, ultimately, to suicide. The writer Ernest Hemingway believed that, quote: 'Life is a rough track leading from nowhere to nowhere' - and, on the 2nd July 1961, Hemingway shot himself with a shotgun and he blew away his entire cranial skull. No point to it at all. And perhaps if we could see, with a supernatural telescope, into the heart of Ernest Hemingway we could perhaps see a question - an indelible question - forged upon his heart with a dagger: 'Where is God? Where is God in the midst of my pain? Where is God in the midst of my heartache, in the midst of my mental stress, in the midst of my illness, in the midst of my broken relationship? Where is God now?'

Where is God when my husband leaves me? Where is God when my wife dies? Where is God when that child I loved is taken away? Where is God when my business fails? Where is God when my roof caves in? Where is He? Come on! Take down the facade, Christian. Take away the mask, Christians - answer the question, it's worth answering: 'Where is God when these things happen to me? Where is He?'. Have you ever asked that question? David, in the Psalm that we read, asked exactly the same question. But he asked it because there were those around him who were asking it of him, and he got to hear it so much that he began to imbibe it and think it himself - and he began to say, 'Where is God? Where is God in my life?'

The background to the Psalm that we read this morning is simply this: that David, and some of the Jews, were exiled far north of Palestine. He was taken away from Jerusalem, he was taken away from his home, and in a foreign land, in foreign sod, he cries out for his homeland. He misses it. But remember that David was a King, and David was the King of the people of God, God's chosen people, and perhaps the thoughts were coursing through his mind: 'Why has God forsaken His people? Why am I here in a foreign land? I can't go to the temple to pray, I can't bring my daily worship to God'. And people were walking by him of another religion, of another nationality, looking at him and saying: 'Where is your God now? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who tells fables about going across [the] Red Sea, about earthquakes, and lightning from heaven, and ten commandments? Where is God now? He delivered you out of Egypt. Where is your God now? Where is He?'. So David becomes downcast in his soul, and for all we know he could start think that question himself: 'Where is God?'

I want to ask you this morning, in your life this morning - believer or unbeliever - is there a spiritual drought? In your life, like David's, is there a drought? You see, David, in verses 1, 2, 3 and 4, he cries out to God, he says: 'As the deer pants after the water brook, so pants my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before Him?' - he is longing for God. You can see it, can't you? That deer, the bones sticking out of it all over, its skin and fur parched as it walks in the desert, its eyesight weakened, its tongue hanging out as it's looking for refreshment, freshness - it's looking for water, and it pants out for it. And just in that same way, David is panting for his God, he just wants to see God. In all of his mess, in all of his crisis, in all of his anguish - all he wants to do is feel the hand of God on him and to know that God is there. Like the traveller in a desert, like the spaniel in the hot day's sun, like the alcoholic gasping for a drink, David is coming to God and David is gasping in thirst for Him. And in David's depression, in David's despondency, he has an insatiable thirst for God's presence - He wants God to be near him!

When we look at verse 2 we see that - we know ourselves that hunger, you can put up with hunger for a little while, but thirst is something that you cannot put up with - and it got so unbearable that he's crying out to come before God, he has an intense craving to see God, to meet God! Is that you today? Of course, every Christian should have an intense desire to meet God, we all know that. But perhaps you're here this morning, and there is something in your life, like David - there is something that has shattered your life, there is something in your life that seems to have made it pointless. Your life, as far as you can see, is over and you're asking, you're just wanting - as if God could come down, and God could lift you up like a little child and take you and nurse you. You want God to be there. If that's you this morning, do you know what I want you to do? I want you to thank God, thank God that you have a thirst after Him! It's not nice - and what many of us are going through may not be nice - but thank Him for the fact that you have a thirst, you long for answers!

In verse 3 we see that David says: 'I stopped eating. I hadn't eaten for long time, and the only food I had, the only meat I had was the salt that was in my tears. My tears were my food, day and night! That's all I had! That's my diet!'. And you all know that tears show earnestness, don't they? You never know a person's more sincere than when they shed a tear - and David's shedding tears in the midst of his sorrow, in the midst of his pain, he is at the end of his tether and he is crying out to God, 'Oh God, look at my tears'. And God says 'Look David, I'm taking your tears into a bottle, I'm counting them - they count before me, they're holy water!'. Your tears count in the sight of God.

But do you know what David does? He makes a mistake that many of us make, and in verse 4 he starts to look within himself, and he says: 'When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday'. He's saying, 'When I remember, I pour out my soul within me' - do you know what he's doing? He's destroying himself, he's becoming introverted, he's becoming introspective, he's looking within himself for an answer, he's looking within himself to blame, to apportion guilt upon himself. And then he begins to think of the good old days, many of us have done that. He thinks of when he was in Jerusalem, and when he was with the multitude, and when he went up to the temple on the Sabbath, on holyday, and he worshipped the Lord - and maybe you're here this morning and you used to worship the Lord regularly but you can't do it any more. You used to come to church regularly, but you can't bring yourself to it, perhaps you're listening on the tape and you can't get out - there's something stopping you, and it's not illness, it's not health, and you feel like David. Maybe you can't come, maybe you won't come - and maybe all that you can think of is the days that used to be, when things were alright, when things weren't the way that they are now. And you say with the hymnwriter:

I sigh to think of happier days,
When Thou, Oh God, wast nigh,

When every heart was tuned with praise,
And none was more blessed than I!

But those days are gone. And like two men, David's reason reasons with his faith, and David's faith reasons with his sorrow, and David's hope argues with his sorrows and his anguish, whether God is true. Is He true to His word? Is He with me through the darkness, through the clouds and through the shadows? Is He there? Is He with me? - and David's in a drought.

But then we see that David longs for different days. He talks in verse 6 of the Jordan, '...the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, and the hill of Mizar...' - and we know now that those places were places of great water. But I want you to see how the tone changes within this Psalm, because one minute he's in a drought and he's looking for water, but the next minute we find that David is drowning. He has gone from drought to drowning. And the very source that he thought would solve his problem - the very thing that he thought would give him life - it is the thing that overwhelms him, it's the thing that drowns him - and nowhere, no matter where he turns or where he looks, no matter who answers his question, he cannot find satisfaction, he cannot find peace. He begins to drown.

I don't know whether you've ever heard of William Cowper, but he wrote such hymns as 'There is a fountain filled with blood' - some great hymns he wrote. But William Cowper, at the age of 32, passed through a great crisis in his life. William Cowper tried to end his life by taking poison, and then when that failed he tried, and hired, a taxi - in those days a horse-drawn cart - and he ordered the driver to take him to the Thames. And he went to the bridge there, but on that night it was a very foggy night and the driver wouldn't take him any further - so, disgusted, he got off the cart and he walked to the bridge himself, only to find him[self], by the providence of God, standing at his own doorstep. Frustrated and angry at this, he went into the house and he tied a rope to the ceiling and he tried to hang himself. He was found unconscious, but alive, on the floor. The next morning, he fell upon a knife - [only] for the blade of that knife to break, and his life again was spared. This is a hymnwriter now! The next morning, in an unusual fit of joy that just seemed to come upon him, he lifted the word of God from a shelf and he opened at the epistle to the Romans. And whatever he read - I don't even know what it was he read - but from it he found great strength, he found great relief and he penned these words as he thought of his past day:

'God moves in mysterious ways,
His wonders to perform.
He plants His footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Blind unbelief is sure to fail
And scare will wash in vain.
God is His own interpreter
And He will make it plain'.

David goes to the places where water is found, and he cannot find relief, he cannot find satisfaction - and outside he says 'Deep calleth unto deep', what does that mean? It means this: that perhaps there was thunder in the sky, perhaps there was lightning - and it seemed that that lightning, that thunder was echoing the anguish and the brokenness that was in David's heart. Echoing around his soul was this terrible storm of grief and pain. It was like the beat of a drum, you know when you hear a band going down the street and you nearly feel the beat within you - it was like that. It's like a stringed instrument, I'm told that when you tune a stringed instrument in unison with another stringed instrument exactly right, and you pluck one of the instruments, without plucking the other, the note will sound. And David, from all the turmoil outside, could feel his turmoil within - and he felt that the deep of the sea with all its devastating anger was within him,

destroying his soul and destroying his spirit. That's what Jonah said, you know, in Jonah chapter 2 and verse 3, when he was being tossed to and fro in the sea, what did he cry out? He cried out what David cried out in verse 7: 'All thy waves and billows have come over me!'. And David felt that he was drowning.

David felt, in verse 9, that he was forgotten - and his faith was inquiring of God: 'Lord have You forgotten me? Have You put me on the shelf? Have You forgot to care for me? Have You forgot to love me? Have You forgotten Your promises towards me?'. And in verse 10 he feels as if there's a dagger going into his very bones, he feels - in our terms - as if there's a bullet going between his ribs, right into his heart and soul, and it's so, so painful! Have you ever been there? In drought? In drowning?

I want you to see, as we close this morning, that David had a divine hope. We see it in verse 8, in verse 9 and verse 11 - and David says, he just sums it up, and he says, 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?', he answers the deep crying within him, 'And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him who is the help of my countenance and my God'. When Sir Harry Lauder lost his only son - he was killed in World War I - he turned to his best friend and he said this, and I quote: 'When a man comes to a thing like this there are just three ways out of it. There is drink, there is despair, and there is God. By His grace the last is for me'.

If I can tell you with all that I can muster up within me, on the authority of this Psalm - and listen, I don't know what your anguish, I don't know what your turmoil is, I don't want to even venture and think of how awful it is - but listen! Listen to me! Listen to God! God is there! He is there! And the world might say, 'Where is your God? He is dead!'. But listen! God says to you in love, and listen to His voice, you've been yearning for it, you've been thirsting for it, you've been longing for those words of a lover in compassion to you: 'I am there!'. Do you hear Him? And as if, like gulps of divine mercy, as David - like Jonah was tossed to and fro in those great breakers and rollers - he gets those gasps of divine air and grace, and he feels the life flowing back within him...and he remembers that a loss of the sense of God's love is not a loss of that love itself. Did you hear that? Just because you can't feel it, just because you can't see it, just because you're not aware of it, it doesn't mean it's not there - and in fact, God could be nearer to you today than He has ever been!

'O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off. Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways. For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it. Whither shall I flee from thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there'. That's what God's saying to you this morning: 'If you go to heaven My child, I am there!' - '...if I descend to hell...' - 'If you make your bed in hell, I am there!'. 'If I take the wings of the morning...', if you try to flee from God, He says, 'I'm there, I'll get you, I'm with you! 'If I dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea...' - 'I'm there My child! I'm there! Even there shall My hand lead thee, and My right hand shall uphold thee'.

Listen! God is love! Christian, non-Christian, listen! Unsaved one - God is love! In all your anguish, in all your disaster He wants to take you, He wants to embrace you, He wants to love you - in His mercy, in His grace, in His compassion, He wants you! God is love and God is faithful - and because God is love and God is faithful, David says that there is hope: 'Hope thou in God' - God is there! He loves me, He'll never fail me. Hope in God!

Don't murder yourself for asking the question 'Why?'. If we had time this morning we could turn to the Lord Jesus Christ when He was on the cross, and some of the most famous words that He spoke were these: 'My God! My God! Why? Why hast Thou forsaken Me? Thy Son - why have You done it?'. Now no-one can tell

me that He didn't know why. Do you honestly think that the Son of God didn't know why He was on the cross? Sure He went through His whole earthly ministry telling people that He was going to the cross, telling His disciples and sharing with them why He was going to the cross - that the Son of Man must die, and the third day be raised from the dead for the forgiveness, for the remission, of sins. He taught that was what His life was about - about him dying, and rising, and forgiving! Why did He ask 'why' on the cross then - if He knew? Do you know what that tells me, my friend? It tells me this: answers aren't any good. Christ had the reason, He had the reason on the cross why He was there - for sin, for God's holiness - He had it, He knew it, yet He still cried why! Why? Because it wasn't a cry from His intellect, it wasn't a theological cry - it was a cry of a Son to a Father from His heart! He knew why, but His heart still cried out to His Father.

I don't know why you're suffering - and let me tell you, nobody but God can tell you why. But listen, my friend, this morning: the answer to that question wouldn't make a difference to you, it wouldn't ease your pain, in fact it may even amplify your pain. But what you need to know is this, this morning, listen from David, who testified of it in his life: that in the midst of your sorrow, your anguish, your pain, in your storm - God is there!! He is there, and He isn't going anywhere. He says, 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee'. He says, 'Fear thou not, for I am with thee. Be not dismayed for I am thy God. I will strengthen thee, yea I will help thee, yea I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness'. He says, 'The Lord of hosts is with us! The God of Jacob is our refuge!'. Listen, my friend, in your pain: God's grace is sufficient for thee.

Spurgeon was once on a boat floating down the Thames, and he spied a little fish, and he thought about that fish, and how that fish - how much water that fish would swallow daily. And he thought of the River Thames, that great river, saying to the fish: 'Little fish drink as much as you like'. And God is saying to you, my friend, in your pain, in your heartache, in your anguish, in your bereavement - God is saying: 'My grace, here it is My child. Drink as much as you like'. Will you take it? Will you feel Him lift you up in His arms of love? Will you let Him embrace you? Will you let Him comfort you? Will you have that hope that is in God?

Our Father, we thank Thee for this great assurance, this great comfort and balm - that in the times of life's storms, when the sea billows roll, we know that we have a refuge, we have a safety, we have a cave, we have a covert in the breast and in the bosom of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, help us - all of us - to take shelter there today. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - September 2000

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"The Barren Womb And The Virgin Birth"

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Matthew chapter 1, and we're taking a break from our current series on Lord's Day mornings in the Sermon on the Mount. The fact that it is Christmas, and also the fact that I believe I have a message from the Lord for you all, I want to share with you today.

We're beginning our reading in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 18: "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS".

Let's bow our heads and pray together as we come to God's word: Our Father, we thank Thee for the name that is above all other names, the name of Jesus. We thank Thee, our Father, that He was called and is called Emmanuel, God with us. Our Father, if the truth be told, all of us - no matter who we are or where we find ourselves today, whether we are among the converted or the unregenerate - all of us need God with us. We pray that through Thine eternal Word that Thou wouldst minister Christ through the Spirit to us. Oh, send Thy Spirit, Lord, now unto me, that He may touch our eyes and make us see. Show us the truth concealed within Thy Word, and in Thy book revealed. Let us see Thee, Lord. Amen.

The title of my message today is: 'The Barren Womb and the Virgin Birth', the barren womb and the virgin birth. It has always fascinated me, the great deliverers that God brought forth from barren wombs - both in the Old Testament and in the New. At a casual glance you will learn that there was Abraham and there Sarah. Abraham was 100 years of age, and Sarah not far behind at 90 years of age. In Genesis 11 verse 30 we read that Sarah was barren, yet of course the plan of God and the story of God's word is that it was that barren womb of Sarah's that brought forth a deliverer in Isaac. Read further through the book of Genesis and we find Isaac, Abraham's son, married Rebekah. In Genesis 25 verse 21 we find there too that Rebekah's womb was barren. Yet, as we read through, we find another miracle taking place, and Jacob - who later became Israel, the father of the nation - he was born to Rebekah's barren womb.

Then Jacob, he married, he married Rachel. In Genesis 29:31 we find that her womb also was barren, yet it was from her womb that Joseph was born - another deliverer to the people of Israel. We go into the book of Judges to chapter 13 and verse 2, and we read of a man called Manoah, his wife is unnamed. We find in that time when there was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in their own eyes, and they needed a deliverer, that Samson was born from Manoah's wife's barren womb. In 1 Samuel chapter 1 we read of a man called Elkanah, a woman by the name of Hannah - she too possessed a barren womb. Again a time of great sin and depravity in the nation, again a void of a deliverer - they needed a man to lead them - and we find that from that barren womb of Hannah, Samuel was born.

We read on, we find another barren, widowed womb. It was owned by Ruth. Ruth found mercy in the eyes of the Lord, and we read also that she bore Obed, who begat Jesse, and Jesse was the father of David. Great deliverers born from barren wombs. We go into the New Testament, and we find exactly the same thing - not to the same extent, but we find in the beginning chapters of the Gospels a man by the name of Zacharias and a woman by the name of Elisabeth, also past the age of childbearing with a barren womb. We find that the greatest prophet ever born of woman, John the Baptist, was born of her womb.

It has always fascinated me, but as I have been meditating for messages to bring to you over this Christmas period, whilst I was meditating on this - not specifically, but as I was pondering what I should preach to you today I sensed, I can't tell you how, but just in my mind that the Holy Spirit was causing me in some way to compare these births from barren wombs to the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ from the virgin's womb. Essentially, in doing this, it has brought me to two questions - really one question: what are the similarities between the births from the barren wombs and the birth of our Lord Jesus, and what are the fundamental differences that we must lay down today?

Bear with me today, we must understand what barrenness meant in the Old Testament. When you read through the Old Testament it's not long before you gather that barrenness was considered to be a curse, it was seen by women in Israel to be an affliction, and they believed that it was an affliction sent by God. You remember the story of Abraham and Sarah, remember Abraham lied to King Abimelech about Sarah, he didn't tell him that she was his wife, but he said: 'She is my sister'. Because of that, to save the nation from sin and to save Sarah, it says: "The LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife". It was the Lord did it, and therefore people in Israel assumed that it was the Lord who took away this ability to procreate. Because God had given this gift of procreation it was considered to be both a commandment and a blessing of God, if it was taken away it was seen to be a curse and an affliction of God. It was commanded to procreate in Genesis chapter 1 and verse 28: "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth". We find that when Noah landed the ark there on Mount Ararat, that he too and his family was told the same thing: "Go forth, and multiply, and replenish the earth".

Right through the Old Testament, in Psalm 127 especially verses 3 and 4, we can see how it was considered a blessing. He says: "Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth". So in Israel fertility was one of God's blessings on His ancient people, on His ancient nation. So how else could these people interpret barrenness? Only as a curse and an affliction from God.

In the light of that let me make a short digression, because this is extremely important - and I get more and more distressed with the confusion that is made between the Old Testament and the New Testament today in Christendom. A great deal of doctrinal confusion, and more than that, a great deal of personal pain is caused because people - whether they be preachers or the ordinary people in the pew - wrongly apply the Old Testament principles to New Testament believers today. We are not Israel, we are the church. We are not a physical people, but a spiritual people. You must realise in your mind that in the Old Testament Israel's blessings are concerning a physical land, the promised land, that physical land would bear for them physical blessings - but we are not Israel. We are a spiritual people of God, we are the church with spiritual blessings.

What I mean is this: yes, children to us, even as God's people today, are still blessing from the Lord to any Christian - but it should not be interpreted to be the opposite, that without children it is because of disobedience and God's displeasure toward us. Get that out of your head! We are God's spiritual people today, it was the blessing of being in the land that meant fruitful wombs in Israel, but we do not live for physical blessing of the grapes in clusters falling down, for the riches of the promised land, we live for a heavenly home. Paul says: 'We are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ'. He says

in Philippians: 'Our conversation', a better translation, 'Our citizenship is in heaven; from there also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ'. We are a heavenly people.

Even though that is the case, childlessness is still an awful burden for anybody. You can see that from the case of Hannah. She is one of the most poignant characters in the whole of the word of God. It says that she was greatly distressed because of her predicament, she was in bitterness of soul, she wept and would not eat, and she cried continually out to God because she couldn't have children. For her it was a cause of embarrassment, it caused feelings of failure within her soul, like it does for 10 to 15% of marriages affected by the same predicament today. It can breed feelings of inadequacy and guilt, it can even turn to anger, and even anger against God. It can become a fear of the future, growing into old age without children and grandchildren - the fear of loneliness and frustration. Now let me say this, and this is a delicate subject but I feel I have to say it: please do not jest with young couples about when you will be hearing little feet pattering. It amazes me the insincerity of some believers today! Recently I have witnessed young Christian girls breaking their heart because of the insensitivities of Christian jokers. If we need anything as Christians today it's greater love for one another, it's a greater concern for each other, a greater sensitivity that there are others hurting around us that we don't know about, and we might never know about.

But as we find from scripture, there is little that anyone can say to help a woman who cannot bear a child. Elkanah found that out to his detriment, for he turned to his wife Hannah in verse 8 of chapter 1 of 1 Samuel: 'Hannah, why weepst thou? What's wrong with you, why are you not eating? Why is your heart grieved? Am I not better to you than ten sons?'. The answer was: 'No'. Undoubtedly Jacob too proved his love by working for Rachel - you know the story, 14 years - Rachel could never have doubted that he loved her. Perhaps, probably as it was the custom in those days, he loaded her with jewels. She was beautiful, the word of God says, to look upon. But none of those things: the love of Jacob, the jewels, her own beauty upon her face and body - none of it was a compensation for the lack of a son. The terrible truth of it all was that Leah had four laughing lads about her skirts, but an unfruitful Rachel was mocked by men, and women shut out the lip against her.

Nothing you can say or do can meet that need. I can imagine Rachel, her eyes red from weeping, and her hair dishevelled, and the voice hoarse with groaning, coming before Jacob with the piercing cry that we find in Genesis 30 verse 1: 'Give me children or I die!'. Nothing we can say or do can meet that need, but if I can just say this: if there's someone here today thinking 'I must have done something terrible, God must be cursing me'. Maybe you're looking to your past and recalling something you've done in your youth, and you think subconsciously that it's for that reason that you don't have any children today - banish the thought! Banish the thought! Be liberated from it today, it is the lie of the devil! I cannot tell you why this is your lot, but don't for one moment believe it is God's curse on you, because it is not!

Can you imagine today what an extra burden it was for an Old Testament woman to bear the burden of God's displeasure? Feeling that it was God displeased with her, and also the fact that Israel as a nation needed a deliverer, and she would have longed to be that one who would have brought Israel's deliverer into fruition - but she couldn't even bear a child! Can you imagine the pain? The extra burden that would be?

The surprising thing to me as I studied this this week was: although the general thinking of the Old Testament was that God had shown displeasure with you, that you had been disobedient if you had no children, there are several instances in the Old Testament where barrenness is not attributed to disobedience. If you look at Sarah, there's no occasion of disobedience whereby her womb was shut up - the same with Rebekah, the same with Rachel, the same with Manoah's wife, the same with Hannah, the same with Elisabeth in the New Testament. In fact, as I have been studying, I've found it difficult to find one woman in the Old Testament whose name has been cursed of God by childlessness. The only example I can find that is even near it is Michal - remember, she laughed and mocked David for dancing naked in front of the Ark? It

says that from that point on she bore no children - but that mightn't even have been a curse from God, that might have been estrangement that had come into the marriage from that point on.

So, how are we to understand these women's barrenness? Why does it happen? If it's not a disobedience to God, even though it may be perceived to be so in the Old Testament, why has God delivered Israel, and brought deliverers, out of barren wombs? Well, if we could see the first three cases in the word of God: you have Sarah, you have Rebekah, and you have Rachel. If you think about it for a moment you will remember that these three women were ancestresses of Israel, they were wives to Israel's patriarchs. The first, Sarah, was the wife of Abraham, and God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars of the sky and the sand of the sea shore - God had promised Abraham. God had blessed Isaac in Abraham, God had blessed Jacob in Isaac, and so on - and right throughout the twelve tribes and over the whole nation the promise of God was given to them, yet all of these men brought forth their children from barren wombs.

What was the reason? Do you know what I believe the reason is? God was asking these couples in pain and anguish: 'Is your sterility an insurmountable barrier to me accomplishing my plan and my promise? Is your barrenness a threat to all that God has said? Is it impossible to me?'. God would come into their home, into their life, and He would overcome by His power and by His promise an obstacle that seemed to be insurmountable for the testimony of His glory and His name. Now listen, God has not given us that promise, God has not promised to us that we should have children - but, my friend, He gave the promise to Abraham, and to Isaac, and to Jacob. God was saying: 'Even though you have a barren womb, nothing will be an obstacle to my plan and my purpose'.

Isn't that good to know today? Isn't it? God was proving that nothing would stand in His way, and that's what the Psalmist means when he says: 'He maketh the barren woman to keep house, and to be a joyful mother of children'. Praise ye the Lord, for nothing is impossible with Him! I don't know about you but I, as an accomplished sinner, can sympathise with these women's failure when it came to believing God. As you go through the record we find that Sarah laughed, we find that Sarah and Rachel - both of them - encouraged their husbands to take surrogate wives, Hagar for Abraham, Bilhah for Isaac, to raise up children by the flesh rather than by the promise of God - to do it their own way. You can see what's happening here, here is an insurmountable problem, here is the promise of God - and the promise of God seems not to be fulfilled in their sight and in their understanding, so they try to fulfil the promise of God themselves.

Insurmountable is the problem of sin today in humanity, and it always has been. My friend, if you're here today and you're not saved, I want you to know from the word of God that your sin cannot be overcome by the flesh - your fleshly actions or any flesh of any man - it cannot be done. It must be God's way and God's way alone. Certainly this barrenness that was in these women's wombs was not a consequence of the individual's sin, but certainly typically it can speak to us of the barrenness of the nation of Israel, of the need for a deliverer, and ultimately the need for a Saviour. It would seem insurmountable, wouldn't it seem impossible to you that God could save men and women that are on their way to hell when He's a holy God, He's a righteous God, when He can't look upon iniquity? But isn't it wonderful, isn't it wonderful today that God not only promised Abraham that his children would be like the stars of the sky and like the sand on the sea shore, but He promised Adam in the very Garden of Eden that there would be a Saviour.

He may have said to Abraham: 'Thou shalt surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in thee'. But how would all the nations of the earth be blessed in Abraham? I'll tell you: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel'. Whether it's the barren womb, or whether it's the virgin womb, there is one thing in common right throughout the whole scripture and it's this: God would have His way, God would bring that Man forth, God would do it in His own time and in His own mechanism - and, praise God, we're

the other side of it today and we can read in the Scriptures: 'When the fullness of time was come, God brought forth His Son made of a woman'. Hallelujah! Made of a woman!

Do you know that His birth was the dream of every Jewess? In Daniel 11:37 we read these words concerning antichrist: "He shall not regard the God of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god: for he shall magnify himself above all". Many expositors and preachers have interpreted that 'he will not desire the desire of women' as meaning that he is a homosexual, a sodomite, as meaning he is a member of the Roman Catholic faith and is chaste and does not marry. I don't believe that's what it means - the desire of women right throughout all of the Old Testament was to give birth to Messiah, and antichrist will not regard the desire of women, Messiah.

The desire of all women in Palestine was to be the vessel to bring Messiah to Israel. You can all see it coming together when you come into that nativity scene in Luke chapter 1 verse 28, the angel came unto Mary and said: "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women". She was a virgin: 'I know not a man, how can this be?'. The obstacle in Mary was not a barren womb, but was a virgin womb - but it wasn't an obstacle, it wasn't a barrier, the word of God would teach us that it was an absolute necessity that she was a virgin! Even the virgin womb was no obstacle in presenting us today with a Saviour. Women who were barren in the Scriptures brought forth the noblest of children - we've looked at it, remind yourself: Sarah, barren until 90 years of age, begat Isaac. Rachel's piercing cry, 'Give me children or I die!', was answered and she bore Joseph who delivered the nation. Manoah's wife bore Samson, another deliverer of the nation. Hannah, a smitten soul, after sobbing in the sanctuary and vowing vows and continuing in prayer, ignored Eli's scorn poured on her soul and received her answer in Samuel, giving a prophet to Israel. The barren and widowed Ruth found mercy and bore Obed who begat Jesse, the father of David, of whose line came John the Baptist, of who Jesus said: 'There is no greater prophet born of women'.

But, my friend, look at the difference today: the Lord Jesus Christ would not be born of a barren womb, but rather He would be born of a fruitful womb! That womb would be fertilised not by man, but by the Holy Spirit of the Living God! What a difference! Barrenness wouldn't do, only a virgin womb could give sanctuary to the Son of God. There's no parallel with this conception, there's nothing to compare. This wasn't a miraculous conception like the rest, this was a virgin conception! In fact, this was beyond the natural, there was no natural process at all within the conception of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, His birth was normal, but His conception was of the Holy Ghost. Yes, He would be a Deliverer; yes, He would come to a barren nation; yes, there would be no insurmountable objects that would prevent God bringing Him to the people. But, my friend, His Father was God Almighty! That took a virgin birth.

He was the sinless, spotless One. That took a virgin birth. He was the first ever of His kind, He was a divine Deliverer to be born among men, and only a divine Deliverer could come forth from a virgin womb. 'A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us', why did it have to be a virgin womb? I'll tell you why: because God was not supernaturally creating something out of nothing, the Lord Jesus was the pre-existent Christ. He is the Ancient of Days, without beginning and without ending. He was not created like the universe - 'bara', created out of nothingness - but He has always existed and will always exist. That womb of Mary's was only used as a medium and a mechanism to bring the Eternal One into time. Do you see the difference?

These other births were miraculous, but this is something else. Listen to Hebrews, this is wonderful, this has thrilled my heart this week: "Wherefore when he cometh into the world he said, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared for me". This is above the rest, this is beyond them, this is eternally transcendent of anything we find in the Old Testament or in the New - Almighty God here, look at it, is using a virgin's womb as a vehicle for Himself to come among men! A teenager's womb to transport a prepared sinless, separate, sanctified body, a body divinely engineered by God for the task that Christ would

undertake, a body that was kept uncontaminated while in Mary's womb - Mary who was a sinner! Even though she was a sinner I do not hesitate one iota to say that that was a blessed womb to host the holy Son of God.

Oh, this difference is supreme. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the Incarnate Deity. Can I leave you with this in closing in the last couple of minutes? Romans chapter 8 verses 22 and 23 reads like this: "We know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to know, the redemption of our body". This earth cries out like a woman in birth pains for its redemption. Like Rachel crying for a child, the human race has cried out through all time for a Saviour. The problems that would seem insurmountable, the many sacrifices, the many sins, the law of God that they couldn't climb up or climb over, all of it seemed impossible - but what a message! For He has come, and all our sin is gone; and a barren womb or a virgin womb could not hinder God in His holy plan - in fact, God made the virgin womb a necessity. Why? Because our God, in the midst of us, is mighty and He will save!

Think of this for a moment: He gave up the warmth of the eternal light of heaven to be folded in a cosy, dim female womb. The Word of God from all eternity, who spoke and the worlds were, was sentenced to nine months dumbness in Mary's belly. Infinity walled in a womb. The Saviour's first earthly taste was the country barn's bare floor. His first earthly smell might have been the dung of the cattle shed as He was crushed from the womb of that virgin. Why was it all so graphic? Why did it have to be this way? I'll tell you why: because eternity was being squeezed into time! The wonder of it all, and the blessedness of it all today, that from His imprisonment I am made free! Because He took a body, one day I will transcend the body! Because He took terrestrial, one day I will take and put on celestial! From the sweet silence of that babe in the womb, I now can sing a new song from my heart even praise unto our God. Because He was forsaken at Calvary in human flesh, my hand is now clasped by the hand of God, and in His death I have glorious life! Isn't that wonderful? Isn't the lengths that God went to wonderful to save you and me?

Can I ask you today: have you lost the wonder of it all? Have you lost the wonder of it all?

'A child He was, yet had not learned to speak,
Who with His words the world before did make.
His mother's arms Him bear, He was so weak
Who with His hands the vault of heaven could shake.

See how small room my infant Lord doth take,
Whom all the world is not enough to hold.
Who of His years, as of His age, hath told,
Never such age so young, never a child so old'.

Oh come let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.

Our Father, we thank Thee with all our heart that Thou didst send the Lord Jesus Christ from His throne in heaven to that lowly cattle shed. We thank Thee that He came as a Man to save men, but our Father we bless Thee that He came as God to do the eternal work. Father, we worship Him today. We worship Thee: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, for the plan of salvation. We thank You, Lord, for saving us - and we ask Thee that the wonder of the incarnation, that led to the redemption, and one day to glorification will never cease to thrill us through this pilgrimage until we get to glory. Lord, we would just pray that if there's anybody here today that's never been saved by this wonderful Saviour, that today they would know the Lord Jesus as Saviour and Lord. Bless us now we pray, for Christ's sake. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - January 2002

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"When Bad Things Happen To Good People"

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If you have a copy of the Old Testament, I'd like you to turn with me to the book of Job. The book of Job - you have Esther, Job and then the book of Psalms - and Job chapter 1 we're turning to.

I'm going to take time to read the whole chapter, starting at verse 1: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil. And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters. His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east. And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them. And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them. And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the Lord said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.

And there was a day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And there came a messenger unto Job, and said, The oxen were plowing, and the asses feeding beside them: And the Sabeans fell upon them, and took them away; yea, they have slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The fire of God is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, Thy sons and thy daughters were eating and drinking wine in their eldest brother's house: And, behold, there came a great wind from the wilderness, and smote the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young men, and they are dead; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee. Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly".

Our Father, we pray that You would help us this morning, for we seek not to hear the voice of men but the voice of God. For we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Her name was Patricia. She was 35 years of age. I called her my aunt, but she wasn't really my aunt, she was just a friend of my mother. She was a girl who was extremely intelligent, a girl who - it seemed - had everything going for her. She had been through full-time education, she had attended University, she had become qualified to teach other young people. But at 35 years of age she was diagnosed as having cancer. She went through all the medication that you go through, she tried everything and it seemed that it had relapsed for while, but it came back. At 35 years of age she passed into the presence of her Lord.

Stephen is his name. Twenty-one years of age. I went to school with him, he had everything going for him - a brilliant mind. He dropped out of University, he could take it, but he just didn't want the bother. He went into business and seem to be being quite successful - but on a road quite near where I lived, his car careered off the road into a ditch and he passed into the presence of his Lord.

I'm sure you have people in your family, whether young or old, and at some point in their life something has taken hold of them - and you can remember it so vividly - an illness or a sickness, or simply an accident. And suddenly life, when it's so vibrant, when it seems to be at its peak, whether it is through death or through illness, that life seems to be snuffed out. It could be life, it could be simply circumstances - you look around you and the homes of the people you see, they're so degraded. The marriages that you see, perhaps, around you have been broken. The poverty in your area, or even in this town of Portadown, some of it is atrocious. And as we look at these things we can often - so often - be so confused, and we can look heavenward, we can say to God: 'God, what is this all about?'

Archibald McLeish was a playwright. He took pen and paper at one stage and he wrote a play, a contemporary play of the story of Job that we read together this morning. But in this play he has the character of Satan, and the character of Satan says these words: 'If God is God, He is not good'. In other words, he looked at all the things that were happening around him, and he portrayed Satan saying: 'Well, if God is really God, if God is really in control of everything that is happening, He cannot be good'. He went on to say: 'If God is good, He is not God. Because if He was good He wouldn't let these things happen. If He was God He would have control of these things, and He would stop these things'. The playwright commented further, he said: 'Millions and millions of mankind are burned, are crushed, are broken, are [murdered], are slaughtered - and for what? What is it all for? For thinking? For walking round the world in the wrong skin? For walking round the world with the wrong shaped nose, eyelids? For sleeping in the wrong city?'

Today in our age of technology everything is seen as something that must be understood. Everything must be seen as something that we, as men and women, can control. Even our children at school, they are taught in school now to ask questions, rather than to learn facts. Everything that confronts us, we are to ask a question about it - and life, as it seems, is portrayed for us in terms of questions that need answering, problems that need to be solved.

In the book of Job that we read together this morning there are plenty of questions that are given to us, but it seems as you read right through the whole book, there is not much in the way of an answer. The biggest problem that is presented in this book is simply this: 'Why, God? Why do the innocent suffer? Why, God, does bad things happen to good people?'. Now, an easy answer that I could give to this this morning, and you could all go home, is: sin. It's because of sin that bad things happen to people. But if I was to give that answer this morning, that would be a wrong answer, because that is the answer that Job's so-called friends gave him when they were counselling him. They said to him: 'Listen Job, you might think you're righteous but there's something in your life that's offending God, and that's why God is punishing you in this way'.

Well, if we're not willing to accept that explanation - which I'm not willing to accept - the question is not so much: 'Why do bad things happen to good people?', but the question is: 'Why, God, why at all do these

things happen?'. In Job, the book of Job, the need of an answer shows the deepest question, one of the deepest questions, that man has ever asked and it's this: 'What is the point of serving God? Does it pay well? Does it give good dividends?'. The question I want to ask this morning - ask of you all, and ask of myself - as we look into Job chapter 1 is: What does it take? What kind of person does it take? What kind of faith does it take, that a person can keep their faith in a loving God, in a just God, in a sovereign God, when everything around them in the world and in their personal life is falling apart?

What is God holding from us? What is God not telling us that will make sense out of life, or even make its lack of sense a little more bearable? What is God not telling us? Well, this book of Job - it pushes past pat solutions that we are used to hearing, it pushes past one-liners, quips that we are used to hearing - and so often we are guilty of giving to those who are suffering and are unconverted. It moves past all those synthetic explanations of evil. How many times have you been told: 'You'll get through OK. Don't worry about it, you'll get through - remember that where there's bad, well, there's always worse'? How many times have you been told that? How many times have you heard the proverb: 'I wept because I had no shoes, until I saw a man with no feet'? Somebody out there, they're always worse than you are - but that's OK until you look down at the feet of the person telling you that proverb, and they're standing in a pair of boots! You think to yourself: 'Hold on, he's telling me that there's somebody out there worse, yet he's better than me - why can't I be like him? Why can't I have his health? Why can't I have his status? Why can't I have his wealth?'

So often when we're instructed to look over elsewhere at somebody who's worse than us, what happens is - and I know it happens with me - is my head doesn't look to them, my head looks to the person that is better off than I am. Now, yes, positive thinking may have helped Job when he lost his livestock, when he lost his cattle, when he lost his camels, when he lost his agriculture. Positive thinking might have helped when all that happened - but surely it would have been mockery to say to Job: 'Well, look on the bright side', when he lost his children, when he lost his home, and later in the book we see that he actually lost his physical health and his friends!

On the other side of the coin, it would have been wrong simply to take the fatalistic attitude and say to him: 'Well, that's the way the cookie crumbles. That's life! It's tough, you just have to get over these things!'. Some comfort that would have been to a man who was standing there, at one moment in his life he seemed to have absolutely everything that this life could give, and now he has nothing! So in this book I want to see, and I want you to see this morning, that we are face-to-face with a godly, good man who is suffering - and his suffering is intolerable! It seems that his suffering is unending and, as it were, the Holy Spirit catches us up into his pain, into his anguish and into his misery to see the seeming injustice of it all. We hear his poignant plea to God: 'Lord, what on earth is happening? Lord, what from hell is happening? Where is this coming from? Why God, why is this happening to me?' - and we feel, as it were, his sense of abandonment by his own family. We feel, as it were, his pain as his wife turns to him and says: 'Curse God and get it all over with and die!'. We feel his pain as his friends seem to counsel him, and tell him: 'It's all your fault, you've brought it on yourself'. We see his anguish as the God in whom he had faith, he feels that that God has forsaken him.

The frustration is, as we read this little book, as we look into it, as we picture the story here, the biggest frustration of it all is this: that there is nothing we can say, or nothing we can do to ease his pain, or even explain the existence of it! We are powerless as we look into it, we are faced with the failure of ministry - yes! Christian ministry! We are faced with the failure and the inadequacy of some preaching, the inadequacy of some synthetic advice that we give off like a shotgun at times. But to Job God seems callous, God seems unfair, God seems distant - and we are forced, as Christians, as we read this book, to rethink our theology, to remove our prejudices, to look at the whole meaning of what pastoral care and pastoral ministry really means. Even when we re-evaluate all of that, and even when we look at his despair here, and we rethink our theology, and we rethink our ministry - there's still one question that remains, the question of all time: 'Why

do the innocent suffer? Why, oh God, did You allow this in my life? Why, God, did you let my child die? Why have I contracted cancer? Why have I this disease? Why is my heart and my home broken?'. The common denominator of all of these questions seems to be one, and it's this: 'Where is God in all of this?'

So, where was God in Job's life? If you look at chapter 1 and verse 1, we see that God at the very start was right there in Job's life. In verses 1 to 5 we see Job's piety in his prosperity. If you look at verse one it says that Job was perfect, he was upright, he was a man that feared God and eschewed evil. This man was pious, he was a godly holy man, he was morally perfect and upright - now that doesn't mean that the man had no sin, but what it does mean is that this man was blameless. You couldn't have pointed the finger at Job and said: 'Look what he's doing', or you couldn't have told stories about Job and said: 'I remember the time when Job did that'. Because in the eyes of men, although his heart was still sinful like us all, in the eyes of men he was blameless and he lived a holy life - he did what God required and he was obedient to God.

His godliness, verse 1 says, has a positive and a negative aspect to it. First, positively it says he feared God. If you go into the Old Testament, and you go to Proverbs chapter 1 and verse 7, you see that the Old Testament writer there says that the fear of God is the secret to holiness. He says: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction'. So positively, this man Job feared God, he lived his whole life out to please God, as far as he knew it he wasn't putting a foot wrong, he wasn't making a wrong tick with his pen, he did every single thing right it seemed. But negatively it says that, not only did he fear God but he eschewed evil, or he shunned evil, or he turned away from evil. Again this man's life was in keeping with the perfect Old Testament ideal saint. What does Psalm 1 [verse] 1 say? 'Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful' - all Job was was an epitome of this! Positively he feared God, he worshipped God, he followed God in his life. Negatively he left sin, he shunned sin, he pushed it as far away from his life as he could, he was a pious godly fearing man.

If you look at his family in verses 2 to 5, it seems that everything he had was ideal. He had an ideal size of a family for a man of his riches and his land. He had seven sons and three daughters. It seemed that there was perfect harmony in that family. They went to one another's houses for tea and they shared everything with one another. Job, it seems, was a good father. Job was a man who knew that his children weren't perfect, but he even offered sacrifices on behalf of his children - he was the ideal man!

We see his possessions. The passage says that this man, in terms of his possessions, was the greatest and wealthiest man in the whole of the country - and, even though he was the wealthiest man, it says that his riches didn't corrupt him. In fact in chapter 31 and [verses] 15 to 22 you can read that he even gave his money and his riches out to help the poor. Job was so close to God, that God was able to trust him with such riches, such blessings, such privileges.

But it appears that Job's children weren't as great. It appears that Job's children were more prone to the deceitful nature of wealth and the material possessions which their father had. Yet Job was such a great father that he wasn't fooled by their sinfulness, he knew that they were worldly, but he also couldn't keep his children - he knew - from the world. He knew that, no matter what he did or what he said, he couldn't stop them from going into the world - so what he did was he prayed for them. He knew that if he tried to stop them going into the world all he would do was create a spirit of rebellion against his faith. So Job rather got on his knees and, it says, prayed for their souls continually. Parents we can take a lesson out of that, can't we? We can say all we like to our children, and our children love us, and our children respect [us] and may behave at home in a way that you think is pleasing - but the reality is you will never, ever know what they are doing when they're away. The reality is [that] when the door is closed is you don't know what they're getting up to, so it's better to be like Job and to be on your knees for your children rather than nagging at them.

Look at Job. A more caring, godly, ideal man you couldn't think of. Let's look at the heavenly perspective of Job's problems, which are from verse 6 to 12. Look at verse 6, there's a total change of scene. It's almost as if the picture frame has changed and it's gone up like a telescope to heaven, and it says: 'Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan came also among them'. There's a change of scene, it seems that we've been taken into the court of heaven and the sons of God were brought before God, and Satan is there. Now the word in this passage is 'the Satan' - the Satan, because Satan means 'accuser'. It appears here that Satan was often before God, he came before God to give an account to God, and his job was to draw attention, and fret out, and pull out the evil of all mankind. He was like a secret police man, like the KGB, probing for defections and reporting findings of evil in God's saints. Sure that's what Revelation 12 and verse 10 says, that Satan is the accuser of the brethren. So we must beware, because Satan is there, Satan is watching for every move that we make, and he is before God pointing those things out. 1 Peter chapter 5 and verse 8 says, 'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'.

As you look at this passage you can praise God this morning, do you know why? Because God controls Satan. Have you got that? God controls Satan! There is nothing that can go out of control in this world, there is nothing that can happen in this world that is outside the control and the will of God because God controlled him, He had a rein upon him. Now God, as we see from this passage, initiates the drama of the book by drawing Satan's attention to Job's unique character. He says: 'Look at this man Job, have you seen him? Have you seen how holy he is?' - and Satan with satanic cynicism takes up the gauntlet, and he says: 'I'll see how holy he is'. In verse 9 he says these words that you have in your bulletin: 'Doth Job fear God for nought?'. Satan says to him, 'Job has a good reason to obey God! Obeying God pays well! Take away the dividends, God, take away the blessings of Job's obedience, and Job will turn to cursing You!'. He says: 'Just cross him once and You'll see Job's true nature' - and what Satan was basically saying to God is this, 'You have put a hedge of riches, and wealth, and blessing, and success around Job - is it any wonder that he's so holy? Take it away and You'll see what he's really like'.

I want you to notice something this morning - Satan knew something about religion that even some of us don't know. Because some people are in religion, some people are in Christianity for what they can get out of it, is that not true? They're in it for the perks, they're in it for the blessings, and somehow in this age that we live we have developed a supermarket mentality in the church of Jesus Christ. We have become commercial Christians, we have Christian gypsies who flit about from one church to another because of the atmosphere, because of the music, because of the facilities, because of its popularities or its organisations. And I really wonder today that if God were the only attraction in our churches would there be anybody in them?

Satan's argument was so clever because he said to God, he reminded God of all the false professions, all of the failures, the line of them who had fallen away back into sin, who when the going got tough they went going out the door of Christianity - and he insinuates to them that Job's godliness was artificial. Now was Satan right about Job? Is Job only in it for what he can get out of it? Are people only religious because of what they can get out of it? Is your faith in God dependant only on the good that you think you'll get? Or is God so great that He can be loved for Himself, not just for His giving? Can God be held on to by a man when there is no benefits and perks attached to Him? Can I ask you this morning: if you were like Job, think of this, and everything you had - family and friends, status, your job, your money, your health - everything you had was taken away would you be satisfied with God? Would God be enough?

In our lives and our experiences is God an end in Himself? Is our faith rooted and grounded in a personal walk, and a personal fellowship, and a personal communion with the living God - or is it commercial Christianity? Job's faith in God proved to be real and Satan was proved to be wrong, because in verse 20 to 22 we see Job's piety in his problems. No! Job didn't curse God! He took it from the hand of God, no matter

what it was - even though it was bad, even though in his eyes it was evil, it was something that was destroying his happiness - he took it simply because it was from the hand of God. And he fell - think of this! - he had been raped of all the wealth that he had, and because it was from the hand of God, because God allowed it, he fell at His feet and he worshipped God. I don't know about you but that astounds me! Even in all of this his first reaction was to see the hand of God in it and fall and worship - what would our first reaction be? Would it be to curse God? What would it be? Would it be to question God? But what did Job do? He sought God!

You might say to me: 'Hold on a minute David, you're not answering the question. You started out with the question 'Why? Why do all these things happen? Why did God allow such bad things to happen to such a good man?'. Well, this is the whole point of the book, and I want you to grasp this this morning: Job wasn't meant to know why! Have you got that? Job wasn't meant to know why! All of the book hangs on this fact, that if Job had known why, there would have been all these things happening to him, Job would never have had a place for faith in his life - that man Job could never have come forth as gold purified in the fire. It was like, for Job, being in a maze. He couldn't where he was going, but God was up in the mountain looking down on the maze, He could see exactly where he was going - but He wanted him to learn faith, He wanted him to see his way through faith and not by sight.

Now listen this morning: we are to understand from Job, that there are some things which God cannot reveal to us in the present - because by revealing them He would thwart His purposes for good in our life. Enough is revealed by God in the scriptures to make faith intelligent, and enough is reserved in the scriptures to give faith scope for development. Why do the innocent and godly suffer? A final solution hasn't been given in the Bible, a final solution hasn't been given in the word of God, but there has been an interim solution, a temporary solution given which may bring peace to our hearts, until the full and final solution is given in a day that is yet to come. What is it? It's this: suffering fulfils a divine purpose for our good, until we shall see face to face, and until we shall be known even as we are known. The message this morning to your heart from the Lord is this: that there is blessing through suffering! Why? Why is there blessing through suffering? Because through suffering you can come face to face in a real encounter with God Almighty! Self can be slain, and God can be found.

This little book is just an illustration of Romans 8:28 where it says: 'And we know that all things work together for good'. It doesn't say all things are good, it says: 'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose'. In Hebrews 12:11: 'Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby'. It's not nice to taste it. It's not nice to experience it, no-one said it would be, but God knows what the purpose of it is and it's for your good.

What are your problems this morning? What are your trials? What are your persecutions? What are your private sorrows that break your heart when no-one else sees, and they seem to surpass all patience and quench all hope in your life? Well listen to me this morning, and listen to God: all of them are under the guidance of the infinite wisdom of God, and He is operating them for your good!

Robert Burns, Robbie Burns in his 'Epistle to Davy' said these words, listen and I'll finish with this:

'Though losses and crosses
Be lessons right severe,
There's wit there,
You'll get there,
You'll find nay other way'.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - February 2001

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"Learn To Discern"

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Let's turn to the word of God. This morning we're turning to 1 Corinthians, the book of 1 Corinthians and chapter 2. 1 Corinthians and chapter 2, and the subject we're thinking of this morning - it's quite a topical subject, and I mentioned it a few weeks ago when we were thinking of the subject of spiritual gifts, and you'll remember that when we were looking down the list of the spiritual gifts that we had on the overhead, one of the spiritual gifts was discernment. We have entitled our subject this morning: 'Learn To Discern'.

1 Corinthians chapter 2 and we're reading from verse 14 - we'll read from verse 12 to get the context: "Now we have received", Paul says, "not the spirit of the world" - now that's important - "we have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth" - that's, again, important - "but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ".

I want you to keep your Bibles very handy because we're going to be flicking through a few verses this morning, as we think of this important subject about learning to discern.

This is how Newsweek - an American newspaper magazine - once described a Boston church which opened its doors to 1100 teenagers and permitted them to conduct a rock-and-roll festival inside the church. It quotes like this: 'A procession of boys and girls placed a Bible, bread and coca-cola, a pool cue and billiard ball on the communion table to symbolise religion, eating and playing. Then a dozen teenagers, some in shorts, crowded into the church aisles to 'frug on the rug and to do the waatoosie" - now I don't know what the 'waatoosie' is, but maybe some of you know what the 'waatoosie' is.

In Richardson, Texas this time, in a magazine called 'Christianity Today' - that town, Richardson, Texas, is still talking about the worldly ways of the First Unitarian Church. On a recent Sunday morning Pastor William Nichols invited Diana King, a Unitarian from Fort Worth, to take part in the service. She did - and when she was through, Miss King, an exotic dancer at a Dallas night-spot, wore nothing - absolutely no clothes. The congregation of 200 adults and children watched, in fascinated silence, as she shed her clothes in time to the recorded music. Nichols said: 'The dance fit', and I quote, 'very well into our service and no-one complained'. The Pastor also said that he '...didn't think anyone was aroused, but I don't consider the erotic aspect of the dance wrong', he said, 'after all that's the way we were conceived'. Miss King said it was something she'd wanted to do for a long, long time - and she would like to conduct classes for the women church members. She said, 'I would like to do a sermon using the exotic dance and members of the congregation could join me if they liked'.

A poll on Protestant clergy which was taken in McCall's (sp?) magazine recently reported on a survey of 3,000 Protestant clergymen and read like this: 'A considerable number of them rejected altogether the idea of a personal God. 'God', they said, 'was the ground of being. He is the force of life. God is the principle of love, He is ultimate reality...', and so forth. The majority of the youngest group of clergy could not say to have believed in the virgin birth of Christ, or even to regard the Lord Jesus in the traditional way, as divine, as most Protestants were brought up to believe'.

You may say, 'All bad things come from America' - there is some truth and some error in that statement. But I want us all to be very aware this morning, and to waken up to the fact that if we believe that this could not happen here, we are very, very foolish. And, as the Lord exhorts us, we should take heed, those who think they stand, lest they fall. There is an organisation in America entitled 'ECT', Evangelicals and Catholics Together. There has now been formed, recently, in Ireland - and launched a fortnight ago - ECT in Ireland, Evangelicals and Roman Catholics Together in Ireland. And the force that was led by Chuck Colson and J.I. Packer in America has now taken force, and taken flight, in Northern Ireland. And you better believe it, that we are in days, brothers and sisters, that we need to learn to discern - for there are even those who would take the name 'Irish Baptist' who have put their weight, and signed their signature to such a document. Big journeys begin with small steps.

Martin Luther had many fears, but one of his fears he wrote of like this - he warned people, quote, 'I am much afraid that the universities will prove to be the great gates of hell. Unless they diligently labour to explain the holy scriptures and to engrave them upon the hearts of youth, I advise no-one to place his or her child where the scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution' - and Martin Luther includes the church of Jesus Christ - 'every institution where men are not unceasingly occupied with the word of God must become corrupt'.

I want us this morning, in the light of the word of God, which warns that in the last times - in fact even Peter and Paul, and all the apostles warned that in their time, the spirit of antichrist was already at work. He believed he was in the last times, he believed that the Lord was going to come at any time - and Paul and Peter, and all the apostles, saw false teachers that were coming into the church of Jesus Christ and were teaching things that were not according to the word of God. And if the truth be told, apart from the Gospels - apart from the Gospels and the book of the Acts - the majority and the rest of the letters in the New Testament are all written to counteract false teaching. Yet we live in a day, today, when to reprimand false teaching, or to reprimand false cults or religion, or to even name their names as all the apostles did, is frowned upon as intolerance, a lack of Christian spirit and love.

People love to tell you what to do you, don't they? We were thinking of legalism a few weeks ago - and that's people who love to tell you what to do - well, better than that is learning from the word of God what ought to be done, and learning for yourself. People are so willing, today, to sit in their pews and to drink up - and sometimes they like to be told what to do because in the end, it saves them bothering finding it out for themselves. I want to bring before you a few principles this morning, that can teach us how to learn to discern. How with the word of God, and in tandem with the word of God, how to - with the principles and the laws that are laid down there for us - how, for ourselves, to make our own minds up about the things that we face in the world today.

The first thing I want to bring to you is your need to discern. Simply that: you need to discern! Now, the word of God talks about spiritual discernment - it speaks of it as a skill. Indeed, spiritual discernment is a gift of being able to separate divine truth from false error. Indeed, the word of God in 1 Thessalonians 5 and 21, Paul tells these people to 'Prove all things'. Everything that comes across your path, Paul is saying, 'Prove them, see what they are, see if they hold any water, see if they're the 'Real McCoy' - Prove all things and hold fast that which is good. Abstain', he says, 'from all appearance of evil'. And I believe that today people would love to drop that little word 'appearance' out and say 'As long as you're not sinning the sin, it doesn't matter what people think' - but that's not what the word of God says, the word of God says that we are to go out of our way, we're to go the extra mile, to abstain from the appearance - the appearance of evil.

We need today, more than ever, we need to examine everything carefully. And I know how hard it is when, as young people and as older people, we are faced with a barrage of teaching. Different doctrines, different interpretations on this, that and the other - different ways of looking at the Bible, or practical ways of living

out the Bible - and we look to ourselves, and we look to one another, and say, 'How can we make our minds up?'. We are faced with the world, and the world would love to push us into its mould, wouldn't it? It would just love us to be like it and then, when we become more like it, it points the finger to say, 'Well, there's no difference between you and me!'. We're faced with our own flesh. We're faced with the things that sometimes we want to introduce to the church of Jesus Christ - and we only want to do it, if the truth be told, to titillate our senses. And then we're faced with the arch-enemy, the devil. And you better believe it, that he is not interested in the world outside, because he has them! He's not interested in the millions that bow to idols - and Peter says they bow to demons! He's not interested in them, but Satan and all his hordes are putting all their energy, all their effort, to break down the church of Jesus Christ and to water down her Gospel. Lensky, the scholar, said this: 'The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth'. You might think it's drink, or drugs - those are bad things, and they're sinful, but listen - listen to what he says: 'The worst forms of wickedness consist of perversions of the truth'. The worst wickedness you could get, could be dressed up in a collar and a cassock! Twisting the truth of the word of God. He says, 'Spiritual lies, although today many look upon these forms with indifference and regard them as harmless'. How many times have you heard the expression within the church of Jesus Christ: 'Live and let live. It's only a matter of personal taste. Tolerate these people, tolerate their actions, even tolerate their teachings. Don't criticise it even if it is against the word of God?'. If the truth be told, many in today's churches are indifferent about separating divine truth from error. They're indifferent about discernment because they lack spiritual discernment.

When was the last time you heard spiritual discernment talked about? Is that not a sign of the lack of it in the church of Jesus Christ? I was speaking to a Pastor recently, and this Pastor was mourning the fact that people in his own church, they had ceased from sitting down with one another and discussing the word of God. I've talked to those in Bible colleges who lament the fact that no longer do young men sit and debate the issues of the word of God - no longer do they strive, and flick through the word of God - there is an attitude of 'Live and let live, these things don't really matter'. I quoted to you last week about another Pastor, a young man came up to him one day and said to him, 'Listen, I don't believe in what you believe in, but at least you stand for something'. And listen, believers today, in these days that we live in as Christians, as soldiers, militant followers of Christ - if we don't stand for something we'll fall for everything!

The first thing I want to warn against is worldly values. Worldly values or a lack of doctrine. Now this can happen when theological or biblical terms are used loosely, or wrongly - when people use phrases, or address members of the Godhead in a wrong way, or talk about salvation in a wrong way, or the doctrines of the second coming, or the various aspects of the word of God in a wrong way - what happens? Error comes in. Confusion comes in. The word of God teaches that God is not the author of confusion, so if He is not the author, who is the author? You don't need to guess. To dilute doctrine has conditioned many people today to desire only what will make us feel good, make us feel comfortable and satisfy us. And we have evolved, at times, into a 'sound-bite religion' - where we don't want too much to think about, but listen, if we are to grapple and find out who God is, we can only do it through the revelation that God has given to us of Himself, and that's His word. And we only find God - I remember years ago, I used to pray that God would reveal Himself to me, that, almost, I would get a vision of God, that I would go into a deeper level with God - I still pray that, but how foolish I was to forget that God had already given to me His revelation! And the way I was to find Him, the way I was to know Him better, was to grapple with the deep truths of the word of God.

But you might say, 'Well, David that's OK, but doctrine divides. Doctrine divides - if you don't take a clarion call of a doctrine then you'll be united with everyone else!'. That's true, that is true, doctrine does divide - but let me say to you this morning that if you lay truth aside, if you lay doctrine aside and remain silent for fear of man, for fear of opposition, all opposition to the Gospel will disappear but so will truth, holiness and - listen! - God will disappear. How many churches in our land, today, have their graveyards inside because

God has disappeared? I was reading an article this week - and I don't know whether you want to take it or not, but I'll say it to you anyway - this article was suggesting that churches round about, churches anywhere, even across the world, churches who have rejected truth outright and become apostate, churches that have fallen away, never, ever come back. I don't know whether that's true, or whether you can generalise in such a way - but if you think about it, and I've thought about it, of all the churches that I know that have fallen to the dogs, denied the Gospel that has been given to them - and where are they today? Nowhere.

Jude gives us an exhortation in verses 3 and 4: 'Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you and' - listen - 'and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend' - fight - 'for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints'. Not the faith that is a new faith now, but the old faith that is the historical Christian, biblical faith, based on the word of God. 'For there are certain men', he says, 'crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ'. Beware of worldly values that say doctrine is not important.

Secondly, beware of worldly thinking. Relativistic thinking - do you know what that is? Relative, everything's relative. It doesn't really matter, there are no absolutes, there's no right and wrong - 'You can't say that, everyone has their own right and wrong'. Someone perhaps thinks something is wrong, but the other person thinks it's OK and they can live with it, and it suits their lifestyle - relative thinking. And relative thinking has infiltrated the church, and the church today is developing a relativistic mind - and rather than seeing things as right and wrong, rather than seeing things as black and white, true and false it prefers to see things in an infinite shade of grey. Sure don't you know, so many grey areas! Now I'm not saying that there are no grey areas, and I'm not saying that everything is black and white, because everything is not black and white - but somehow, I fear, that today there is too much grey. But rather, Psalm 1 and verse 1 tells us something else, which is not relative thinking, it says: 'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly' - now that implies something. Sometimes people think we're stupid! That implies that a man must know what is the way of the ungodly in order not to walk in it! Does God ask us to walk in a certain path and not tell us how to recognise that path? 'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. But his delight, by day and by night, is not in philosophy, not in education, not in fashion, but in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night'.

Firstly: worldly values; secondly: relative thinking - and, thirdly, I want to warn you about worldly methods and worldly tactics. The church has spawned a preoccupation with image and influence. And on many occasions - now there's nothing wrong with advertising meetings and so forth, don't get me wrong - but on many occasions a business mentality has come upon us. John MacArthur writes, and I want you to hear this: 'Churches today believe they must win the lost by winning their favour. It no longer teaches the biblical doctrines of sin, hell, repentance or the cross - why? Because those would offend the lost and make them feel uncomfortable. Instead, it markets itself as a benevolent, non-threatening agency whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity and intellectual acceptance among the lost. Its premise' - the one thing it wants to do, and beware that we do not do this - 'is to say this: If they like us, they'll like our Jesus'. Sometimes we get it the wrong way round, don't we? 'If they like us, they'll like our Jesus' - but listen, Christ and God does not need us to commend people to His Son! If we just present His Son in uncompromising zeal, and truth, and purity, and all that He said - the good with the bad - people will be drawn to Christ.

1 Corinthians chapter 4 that we read from - two chapters after it in verse 10, says this - and people are running around trying to find intellectual esteem and to be recognised in ways, and don't get me wrong I'm not against intellectualism - but if we substitute the carnal and the fleshly for the spiritual, the church will die! 'We are fools', he says in 1 Corinthians 4 and verse 10, 'We are fools' - not professors! - 'fools for Christ, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised'. Why were

they despised? Because they were uncompromising! Because when they preached in the open air of Christ, people laughed at them and spat at them! It's great, isn't it, to be like our Lord who, it's said of Him, that He was a man of no reputation. And what are men running around today trying to do? Get a reputation, be respectable in the eyes of church or state - but Christ was of no reputation and church and state rejected Him! But we are fools, 'Even unto this present hour we both hunger', he says in verse 11, 'and thirst, and are naked, and are buffeted, and have no certain dwellingplace; and labour, working with our own hands: being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it: being defamed, we entreat: we are made' - listen - 'as the filth of the world!' We are the filth of the world for Christ! Is that the way we think of ourselves? Sometimes I wonder if Christians today read the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. For in John 15 and verse 18, he says these words: 'If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also'. Would we rather suffer the reproach of Christ, or would we suffer the reputation of men?

We need to beware of worldly values, we need beware of worldly thinking and worldly methods - worldly interpretation is the fourth thing we need to beware. Failing to interpret and read the word of God accurately - being indifferent to God's word, not caring about God's word. You know, the reading and the study of the word of God is a science! It is an exact science, it's not something that is to be done willy-nilly and off the top of the head! It is something that is to be taken care in, there is to be precision, there is a skill - and listen: you as believers, you need to learn the word of God! You need to read the word of God, you need to listen to good, sound preachers of the word of God, and read doctrinal books about the word of God - you need to do it! John MacArthur coined a phrase that: 'Today is a generation of baby Christians'. You know, you set the child down on the floor and it's crawling around and suddenly there's a coin - an old dirty coin - lying on the floor and he picks it up - and what does he do? Into the mouth! It's not edible, sure it's not? It'll do him no good - and we have Christians, all across our land today, all across the world, who are baby Christians - no matter what it is they lift it and stick it into their mouths and feed upon it for spiritual food, even if it's not helpful! But what does the apostle say? 'Oh! That we would go on, to cease to be babes and feeding on the milk - and go on to the meat of the word of God!' - and that's for everyone! Some Christians with stunted growth, they believe that they have to feed on the milk for all of their Christian life - that's not the way it works! You go on to the meat.

But worldly discipline, we need to remember that the church of Jesus Christ, fifthly, it could have taken in worldly discipline. You see in Matthew's gospel and chapter 18, we read about the sleeping giant of the modern church today - and that is church discipline. It's a sleeping giant! It seems to never happen! Now, church discipline is not for kicking people out, it's meant to be for bringing people back in again who have fallen into sin, or who are not the way they ought to be. But listen, it must be done! Because church discipline, as Christ laid down, when you have something against your brother how many of you ever go to him and sort it out? That's how little church discipline there is. But without church discipline, the world outside gets a travesty of a picture of the church of Jesus Christ - because it's meant to be a body of holiness. That holiness can only be safeguarded if we have discipline in our lives and in our churches.

How do we discern? I want to leave you with this, five short ways of discerning. Write them down if you wish. The first thing is: to want it - do you want to discern? Sometimes, you know, I ask the Lord to forgive me for my sins and I repent - I tell Him I'm repenting - but deep down in my soul I know that tomorrow, at the same time, the same place, I'm going to be doing the same thing. Is that your relationship to discernment? You know it's needed, but you think it's not needed for the church today, 'We don't really need that, and there's enough people running about with doctrine' - well, quite frankly, I wish there were a lot more running about with doctrine today. Do you want - are you humble enough to show that you maybe don't have it, and that you need it, or you need to look to someone who has it and seek their guidance?

Secondly, you need to ask for it. You need to desire it first of all, but you need to pray for it and ask God, like in 1 Kings 3 and verse 9 - where Solomon prayed to the Lord for wisdom, and he said: 'Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?'. Now I wonder, when he says 'this thy so great people' is he really talking about the numbers? Or is he talking about the great problems that they had? The apostle exhorts us to judge all things. The other apostle exhorts us to test the spirits, all of the spirits, to see if they are of the Spirit of God.

But thirdly - you can want it, you ask for it - but you need to observe it. You can observe it in other people, because there are people who are good at this, discerning spiritual things. There are people who have the spiritual gift, that we read about weeks ago, of discernment. They think carefully, they think analytically - and what we can do is search the Scriptures and take their example. Fourthly, follow the Holy Spirit. For in 1 Corinthians that we're reading and chapter 2 in verses 1 to 16 - you can read it all when you get home - it talks about how we need to follow the Spirit's guidance when we are discerning. And we follow His guidance, fifthly, through knowing the word of God. This never ceases to amaze me, and I finish with this: that when Paul, Paul went to Berea - listen! Paul the apostle, Paul! If he was preaching here this morning, it would be great - I would be sitting with my notebook taking everything down as if it was the word of God, that's what we'd do! Yet these Bereans, in Acts chapter 17, it says that: 'they searched diligently the Scriptures to see if these things were so'. And for those Bereans even the apostle, his word wasn't strong enough - the only word that mattered was the word of God.

Can I leave you with one verse? 'Study' - yes, that's right, Paul said it to Timothy [in] chapter 2 of 2 Timothy verse 15 - 'Study' - all of you! - 'Study!'. You might say, 'Well I don't study, I can't study!'. It doesn't say there's an option, it says: 'Everybody who is a believer, study to show thyself approved unto God'. I have written in my Bible - and it's in my other Bible - a little saying that basically says: 'Test all things by the word of God. Weigh all ministers, all doctrines, all colleges, all churches, all books, all theories - weigh them all by the weight of the word of God'. And listen, when we do that we will never, like Belshazzar, be weighed and found wanting.

Let us pray: Our Father, may the mind of Christ our Saviour live in us from day-to-day, and may the word of God dwell richly in our hearts from hour to hour. Father, let Christ and His word be our meat and our drink, our down-sitting and our uprising, our breath, our blood - and may, when our skin is opened, our blood be seen to be bibline. Lord, fill us, help us to read, learn, and eat and inwardly digest the word of God that it may become part of us. Father we pray, in these days of increasing darkness, in these days when, Father, people are double minded and unstable in all their ways - we pray, Father, that as the apostle James exhorted us, that those who ask for wisdom that You will freely give it to them. Father, we ask for that wisdom, we ask, in a day of darkness, for discernment that we may follow the path of light - not in a self-righteous, legalistic, proud way, but in a way that others may look upon us and see our good works, and glorify our Father which is in heaven. Bless us now, and help us, Father, as we wait upon You now around the table of the Lord, in Jesus name. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - September 2000

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"The Compelling Commission"

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I have brought this message to you, I believe the Lord is bringing this message to you, today from Luke chapter 14. We'll take time to read most of the chapter from verse 1: "And it came to pass, as the Lord Jesus went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? And they held their peace. And he took him, and healed him, and let him go; And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? And they could not answer him again to these things. And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and showed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper".

We want to really concentrate primarily on the parable that was the final section that we read this morning, from verse 15 right through to verse 24. But the other verses right throughout the reading of this chapter, particularly at the beginning, are the context in which we find this parable and are quite poignant to the meaning behind the parable. The title of the message this morning is 'The Commission to Compel', the commission to compel, or if you like 'The Compelling Commission'.

In verses 1 to 6 you find the Lord Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath day, and the Pharisees have a problem with it, because the Pharisees opposed the helping of the poor during the Sabbath. We see in the Lord Jesus the example of helping the afflicted amidst opposition of the religionists. It didn't matter that the religious people opposed what the Lord Jesus was doing in healing this man, He went ahead and did it because it was right. This was characteristic of the Pharisees, to oppose an action such as this on one little point of the law; because often, right throughout the Gospels, we find them opposing not so much the law of God but the breaking of their human convention - even at the expense of lost souls. The Lord on many occasions rebuked

them, and told them that by their commandments, the commandments of men that they had added to the commandments of God, they made the word of God and particularly the Spirit behind the word of God of no effect - and here you have an example of it here. They oppose the breaking of human convention at the expense of lost souls.

Then as we move on to verses 7 to 11, we observe the Pharisees themselves jostling for position. You find this right throughout the Gospels, that the Pharisees and religionists often jostle for position in the synagogue and in their particular party. To them, we see, position was more important than the poor. So first of all they opposed the breaking of human convention at the expense of lost souls; and also to them position was more important than the poor.

Then we look in verses 12 through to 14, and the Pharisees only invited their friends to their homes - people whom they were like, people who they were comfortable with. But the Lord Jesus exhorts them not to do this, not to invite those who you would expect to be invited to your home, but invite those who you can't get any reciprocation from, invite those who cannot invite you back. Do to others, others who cannot do back to you.

As I was reading through this passage of Scripture I really felt convicted, because there are so many times that I myself, and I feel we as the Evangelical church here in the North, we oppose the breaking of human convention - man's written or unwritten rules - at the expense of souls that are lost. There's a catchphrase going about in evangelicalism today and I think it's very true, it's called the 'comfort zone'. We all live within our comfort zones, don't we? We exist even as Christians comfortably, and in a way that we feel not threatened, and we don't really put ourselves out to any extent - especially to see other people won to the Lord Jesus Christ. Immediately someone comes along and pushes us a little bit out of our comfort zone, we get uncomfortable and we react against it.

As I looked at verses 7 to 11 and observed these Pharisees jostling for position, I was convicted about evangelical reputation. What I'm talking about is this: worrying more about what other churches, other Christians, preachers, think about us, rather than lost souls who are going to hell and need Christ. Then in verses 12 to 14 I saw the principle of grace outlined by our Lord Jesus, not the principle of law that the Pharisees abided to. The principle of law says that 'if you do this, I will do this for you', 'if you invite me to your home I'll invite you back', or 'if I invite you to my home, I expect to be invited back to your home'; but the principle of grace that the Lord is outlining here is: invite people to your home who can't invite you back to theirs, because they don't have one; who can't invite you back to a meal because they can't put a meal on; they have no money, they're the poor, they are the blind, they're the helpless, the outcasts of society. They have no talents to impart to you, they have no education to offer, they have no money to donate - invite them, Jesus says.

Really we could sum up all these verses, and these three particular incidents - verses 1 to 6; 7 to 11; and 12 to 14 - in an overarching theme right throughout it all, it's simply this: how often the established religion in Jesus' day and even in our day ostracises itself from those who really need help. Have you got it? How often those who say they know God are at greater than arms length from those who need God! I wonder if a police photo fit was taken upon these descriptions that we have of the Pharisees today, I'm only asking the question: would we find that our particular modern version of evangelicalism is the picture that would emerge? In our attitudes and in our actions, could it be that we have the face of modern day Pharisaism? That we spend our time so much bickering, and talking, and fighting over little insignificant rules of men and issues of taste, that we don't realise that there are poor people falling into the pit who need our help! Too busy looking over our shoulder about what this brother will think, about what this denomination, this church, this movement thinks of us - our evangelical reputation - that we forget about our Lord Jesus Christ who deliberately made Himself of no reputation to win the lost.

My friends, I want to take you to this parable finally, to really analyse this theme that we have before us in verses 15 to 24. The Lord Jesus tells of a host who invites all his friends to a great supper. You know the great supper, and we don't want to spend too much time on the parable itself but apply it more today, the great supper speaks of the gospel, doesn't it? What a great supper the Gospel is! We know from other stories that there is enough in the Father's house and to spare for everyone, it's a great meal! It's a big dinner, if you like, it's succulent - and as someone has said before: it's a feast, it's not a funeral. It's something to enjoy, it's something to be satisfied in, something to fill the deepest longing of our heart. For tired souls who come in after a day's toiling in the field, it's a great supper, something that you're fed with, it's something where you replace your energies and the fuels that you have used. For those who are tired through life's sinfulness and tragedies and burdens, the Lord Jesus says in the Gospel: 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'. It is a great supper for the tired, it's a great supper for those who are thirsting, those who are hungry. You remember the words of our Lord in John 6: 'I am the bread of life, he that cometh unto me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst'.

It's a great supper for the tired, for the thirsting, for the hungry - and the greatness of the supper can also be seen, probably primarily seen, in the fact that everything is ready. The Master, the host has made it all, it's all finished - and all that has to be done is for men and women and boys and girls to come and eat and to enjoy. That's the gospel, isn't it? Paul said: 'Now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation', because of the cross the Lord Jesus finished the work, and He testified it Himself, 'It is finished' - there's nothing more to do. All we are to do is to come and to believe in the Gospel, and to enjoy all of it. The blood to cleanse has been shed, the Spirit to sanctify and to emancipate from sin has been given at Pentecost, and all the Lord does now is welcome us all to come, to eat, and to live. He says: 'Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out'. Prophetically He says in the book of Isaiah 55 verse 1: 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price'. It's all prepared, it's all ready, the only thing that has to be done is for the invitation to be given for sinners to come and to eat and live!

Now it is in the light of this great supper of the Gospel that we have as believers and as the church of Jesus Christ that I want to bring this warning parable of the Lord Jesus to us, for us to beware that we are not wearing the clothes of Pharisaism when we come to spreading the Gospel. I know, and let's get this out of the way first, that there is a dispensational application to this passage, and I would say that it is the primary application of it - that the Pharisee's friends that the Lord is speaking about is the religious establishment of Judaism of the day, and specifically when He talks about bringing in the halt, the blind, and the maimed, He is talking about bringing in the Gentile heathen who have been ostracised from the commonwealth of God and all the promises of the Gospel hitherto. That's what it's talking about, but you know sometimes I feel that some of you, you get so taken up with the dispensational application that you fail to see that there is a practical, personal, present application in the passage. In other words, there's a spiritual principle behind this that we can apply to our own lives today.

I've put it simply into three statements that I have taken literally straight out of this passage. The first is this: the people, often, that we relate to will not come to Christ. I'd like you to write these down if you have a pen and paper, the people that we often relate to will not come to Christ. Now what do I mean? Well, specifically in this context we're talking about the Jews. Remember that the Lord Jesus is in a Pharisee's home, and he only invited his friends, he didn't invite the poor, the blind, the halt, and the lame along to his home - he only invited those who he knew, those who he related to. They were the people that you would have expected to be in a Pharisee's house at this time: they were religious. But you know, as we go into the Lord's parable, the description of these people are given in three examples. There's the man who said: 'I've bought a field and I can't come to your great supper'. Then there's the man who said: 'Well, I've bought some oxen and I've got to go and try them out'. And then there is the other man who said: 'Well, I've got married and I cannot come'.

When you narrow it down, these people aren't just religious, but they are wealthy enough to buy land, wealthy enough to buy five yoke of oxen, and they are respectably married. They are the 'hoy-polloy' if you like, they're preoccupied with business, with wealth, with family and relationship commitments that they have. We could narrow it down: they are proud, they are business minded, they're occupied with pleasure. If we were to take a common denominator out of these people, we would say they felt that they had no apparent need of this supper. If they really felt they needed the supper, they would have gone to the supper - but they don't need it! Friends, I hope you would agree with me today that the Western world, and particularly Ulster, the affluence that we have in this part of the world, the wealth that people have, the luxury, they really feel in the depths of their soul that, humanly speaking in this life, they have no need of the Gospel. They don't need God to provide bread for their table, they can provide bread for their table themselves. They don't need God to pull them out of a particular hole, they can go and get some benefits to do that, or they can work by the sweat of their brow and get it themselves. We live in an atmosphere of materialism, and this is why I'm asking the question: could this be the reason why the people we often relate to are not coming to Christ? Because we relate as Christians more, it seems, in the modern day to the middle and upper classes than the Christians of previous generations did to the working classes.

You only have to look at where our church is situated today, and the type of people that come along to our church, and we're trying to share the Gospel with people around this church, and we feel like Isaiah in chapter 53 verse 1: 'Who has believed a report? And to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?'. It seems that no-one around here will listen to our Gospel. Now I'm not saying that we don't take the Gospel to people who we relate to, perhaps they are the primary ones - to the Jew first and then to the Gentile and to the Greek - we have to go and ask those people, but if we keep going and asking and relating to them and witnessing to them and they do not come, does that mean that we forget about all those people who we don't relate to and who are more likely, the Lord Jesus says, to come to the great supper? For these people are themselves predisposed to the invitation, the circumstances in their life have been so difficult that they are almost driven to God, if someone would just come along and invite them to this great supper.

In verse 21 we see that God is angry with those who are well off, those who are religious, those who have need of nothing and do not see or want God or the need of Him - God says that He is angry. He was angry with the Jews, and that's why in the book of Hebrews 3 verse 11 He swore in His wrath that they would never enter into His rest. I'm just asking the question now...the people we relate to, often they will not come to Christ.

The second point I want to make to you from the parable today is this: the people we don't relate to would come to Christ if we invited them. Have you got that one? The people we don't relate to would come to Christ if we invited them. If you look at this passage, the host of this great supper said to his servant: 'Go out quickly', and it implies an urgency. It's as if the banquet's going to go cold, and the food is all going to be wasted and destroyed and have to be disposed of. He's telling him: 'Go out now, these people haven't come that I have invited, and before the food gets cold go out and get people to eat it'. Friends, I don't need to tell you that we are most probably and certainly, I would say, living in the end times. The banquet of the Gospel is going to grow cold one day, for the day of God's grace is going to close and there will be no more opportunities in heaven to reach the lost, to reach the people in East Belfast, it will be past! There is the need, and if you could only hear God's voice saying to us now: 'Go quickly! Go quickly! Before it goes cold'.

Don't go to the wealthy, don't go to those who have great professions, don't go to those who have a stable family unit, verse 21: 'Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind'. Go to the streets and the lanes, the places where the common people dwell - not in the courts of the temple, but the red light districts of the city, the slums, the estates, go out there. Go to the poor, those who are poor in spiritual riches, those who are poor in spirit, and who are humble

people and already know their sin and know their great need. Go to the maimed, go to the halt, the incurables of society, the needy people, the people that the self-righteous and the religious have passed by and said that they have no message and no help for. Those who the Pharisees cursed, remember they cursed them! Remember the Pharisee in the temple and the publican? The Pharisee said: 'I'm glad that I am not like this man', and the publican beat his breast and said: 'Lord, be merciful unto me, a sinner'. Are we the Pharisee? 'I'm glad we're not like them'? Go to the blind, those who are powerless to help themselves and to do anything about their predicament.

Can I just move your gaze for a moment, not just to this specific incident of the parable of the Lord, but to His whole life and indeed His life's pattern. Do you know that when you go through the Gospels and you see that when the Pharisees rejected the Lord, who did He turn who? He turned to the multitudes, do you see it? When the religious people rejected Him in the temple, He turned to the multitude on the way to the feast - the people who were coming to worship. When the rich people refused to hear Him, it says that the common people heard Him gladly. When the rulers of the temple and society crucified Him on the cross, and He was hanging there in His dying breath, He was able to turn and bless a penitent thief. Our Lord's pattern was to come to the outcast, the lowly of society.

My friends listen to me today, for this is a message that is breaking my heart and speaking to my own heart, and I surely haven't got it made and I feel very convicted this morning - but I want you to be convicted with me too. It says of David in the Acts of the Apostles: David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep. I think, and I fear, that many of us are serving a generation that died 70 years ago. I'm not talking about changing the Gospel, I think you know me better than to think that I would imbibe liberalism or modernism or 'trendyism', but I'll tell you this: there are people going to hell and we're not reaching them, we're not even coming within a mile of them.

How will we serve our generation? You know, I feel so often - I don't want to be too critical, but I'm looking at my own heart and I see so much that it's just all coming out - we are a reactionary people as evangelical Christians. We adopt pendulum Christianity - in other words, the charismatic movement all they talk about is the Holy Spirit, we know that that's wrong, that they don't talk about the Lord Jesus enough. They get into all sorts of excess that is not of the Holy Spirit at all, so we fling the pendulum swing to the other way and we don't talk about the Holy Spirit at all, we hinder His work in our lives, we don't believe in the fullness of the Holy Spirit and the unction of God upon our lives. But we can do this also as we seek to serve our generation, because there are churches around us that are preaching a social gospel, that are having Daffodil Teas and Jumble Sales, we feel that we can't do anything for unbelievers in case we're seen to be having a social gospel.

My friend, I was reading on my holidays - not this one, I have so many but who's counting them! - on the one a wee while ago when I was away in the Mediterranean a book, and I would advise you to read it, it's called 'Revival Man' the story of Jock Troop from the Tent Hall in Glasgow. Now there's a lot of stuff about Glasgow that I didn't understand, and I had to give it to somebody from Glasgow to tell me what it meant, but you know right throughout that book I was convicted - and you know about this man. He came to preach in the Coalmen's Mission, I don't even know if he preached here - he did preach in Templemore Hall on one occasion - but do you know what he did? Every Sunday morning in life, the Lord's Day, he had a breakfast for the down and outs in the city of Glasgow - he came and fed them all, the place was packed! It was during the war, and he would have at lunchtime on the Lord's Day, he would have a lunch for the service men who were serving in the war. He was helping people that needed help, but he was giving them the Gospel, he was showing them the love of Christ, but he was showing them the love of Christ that constrained him in the Gospel!

You can read about Mueller and the orphanages, a brethren man - so those of you who are brethrenistic minded, this is a brethren man! He helped the children who had no parents, why? Because the love of Christ constrained him, and many of those children could testify how they came to Christ because of Mueller's love. We could name a hundred men like Barnardo, General Booth of the Salvation Army, now I'm asking the question: that was another generation, what about our generation? What are we going to do to love them? Not just preach at them, but to love them for Christ, to bring them to Christ and win them and woo them through His love in us! As I was thinking about this - and I stand to be corrected, I'm sure I will if I'm wrong - but when I thought of this, I couldn't think, and I haven't researched this, I should have but I couldn't think of one incident in the Gospel where the Lord Jesus came directly and specifically to a religious man. You're all thinking now! In John 3 Nicodemus came to Him by night, the rich young ruler came to Him and asked 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?', but who do you find the Lord Jesus going to? John chapter 4, a woman who we wouldn't touch with a barge pole today, because she had too many problems. Zacchaeus is up a tree, he is a tax collector and a publican, and Jesus says: 'Come on down, I'm going to your house today for my dinner'. Do you see it? Why? Because He said: 'I'm not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'!

When I was in Scotland last week I heard of an Assembly, I don't know who they are or what they are, but they stopped doing their door-to-door work because there were people who were coming to church and they had too many problems for them to deal with. Don't say: 'Oh dear' - could we deal with them? Could we handle them? I asked the question of myself as I meditated about all these things: if we aren't seeking out the people who Jesus sought out, are we doing Christ's work? Can we say that we're doing Christ's work? If the people that Christ came closest to, the publicans, the harlots, the sinners, the drunkards, that He was accused of being a friend of, a winebibber, a friend of publicans - if those are the very people that we're the farthest away from! They that are whole have no need of a physician.

Now listen: it's nice, it's not nice, it's difficult, but it's challenging to take up the sayings of the Lord Jesus and actually analyse them and ask ourselves do we really believe them. The Lord said in John 4, after there was that encounter with the woman at the well, 'Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? Behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest'. Now is that true or false? Is He right or wrong? Are we going to dispensationalise that now? Are the fields white to harvest? What fields? The fields that Jesus sent us to: the halt, the blind, the poor, the maimed - and the question we need to ask is not: 'Does that verse fit in with my life?', but 'Are we in the right or the wrong field?'. We're in the middle of a field as we speak. I was down here for a wedding rehearsal on Thursday night, and some of the men and women were taking the Holiday Bible Club leaflets around the district, and you know some of them said to me that they really got their eyes opened on Thursday night. To see the degradation and the depravity, and the scars of sinfulness around the homes and the families and the children in this district - and it's our district! It's our harvest field!

I read a story yesterday, it was reported in The Times Reporter of New Philadelphia, Ohio. It said that in September 1985 there was a celebration at the New Orleans Municipal Pool. It was for all the lifeguards, because in the year that had went by there wasn't one person that had drowned. So there were two hundred people invited to this swimming pool, and 100 of them were certified lifeguards. They had a great night celebrating this fact of this success, and then at the end of the night there were four lifeguards that went around everything, fishing things out of the pool, and they found the body of a fully clothed man floating on the top of the water. A man died with 100 lifeguards around him because they were too busy celebrating what they had in the past.

The people we relate to often will not come to Christ; the people we don't relate to would come to Christ if we invited them; and thirdly and finally, they won't come unless we go out and get them. They won't come unless we go out and get them. I'm not talking about bringing them to church, unless we've suddenly turned

into papists and we believe that the church will save people - it's not the church that we want to bring them to. Now if the Lord brings them here, and we can get them here, praise God - and I would long to see many more people in the Gospel meeting under the sound of God's word. But let us not be standing up in the meeting and praying that the Lord would bring them in, for that's our job! We need to ask the question: when was the last time not that we asked someone, but that we compelled someone to come - not to the meeting, but to Christ?

I hear all this rot - and I don't care, really, today whether you're a Calvinist or an Arminian - it doesn't matter when there are people going to hell. I hear some people say: 'Well, that's the Holy Spirit's job'. That's right, the Holy Spirit is the only one who can save men and women, but the Holy Spirit has chosen you as His ordained instrument to go and win them for Christ. You know, the Holy Spirit has been blamed on more people going to hell than, I think, anybody - because the Holy Spirit has inspired this parable, and the Lord Jesus says: 'You go quickly, and you compel them to come in!'. He says: 'Go to the highways', do you know what the highways were? The broad, well trodden ways of the world, go out there! The host says: 'If you go out there I anticipate that you won't be rejected', do you know why? Because this supper is so great - God has provided so much in salvation that He will not tolerate people not enjoying it! He wants people to enjoy it, and if those who are invited won't come He's going to get people to come who will eat of His great supper!

Luther said: 'Such were His preparations that He must have guests, if He makes them even of the very stones, He'll have guests' - so don't hesitate, don't be afraid to go out! These people might feel that they cannot approach the Iron Hall because of their unworthiness, but they won't be unwilling! If they can see the love of Christ in us, if we show the love of Christ toward them, they will see God's love. We are to go, the Lord says, as ambassadors urging them in Christ's stead, knowing the terror of the Lord, to persuade men to be reconciled by God - men and women who are already in life's calamities, who feel they're living a hell on earth and are looking everywhere and anywhere for a solution and for an answer. But here's the question that Paul poses to us today: how shall they hear without a what? Preacher! How will the whore hear? How will the alcoholic man that can't get out of his bed hear? How will the person that's selling the last piece of furniture to go to the bookies - how will they hear? The off-scouring of the world, the rejected of church and society?

He says: 'Go further, go to the hedges', and I think the hedges here are speaking of how the ceremonial law of Judaism separated Jews from Gentiles, but also separated the unclean. The Lord's saying: 'Go to the hedges, the places where these people are: the neglected, the outsiders, the distasteful, the heathen'. Oh, praise God, I don't know if we've lost it somewhere, but let's get it back: that this is a Gospel of grace we believe in! The only thing that we want a person to have when they come through that door is not a hat, not a suit - in the Gospel now I'm talking about - but the knowledge in their heart that they're a sinner, for that's what they need to come to Christ - that's all the qualification they need! It's a gospel of grace, grace that is greater than all our sin, grace that embraces those who are at the hedges of sinful immoral society, the most distant, the most lonely! Do you and I really believe in the power of the Gospel to be able to reach and to touch and to save even people like that?

The Lord says: 'Go to the highways, go to the hedges' - look at verse 23 - 'and compel them' - an urgency of love! It's not talking about forced by weapons, but the literal Greek word is a word for force, but it means 'compel them by the force of your love, compel them by the truth of your message, compel them by the power of your prayers, the deeds of your charity, the argument of your reason, and the counsel of your wisdom'. Compel them! They may say, and I've heard it, 'I haven't got the right dress' - what do you say? Do you know what the Lord says? You tell them that's no excuse, for the Lord wants you to come and eat of that dinner. My Master won't accept any excuse, it's your type of person that He invites - do we take no excuses from these people? There is a bountiful banquet for them, and all that it lacks is guests! The Lord says that if we obey what He is outlining here we'll have so many guests that we'll not have room for them, and we'll

need to build a bigger building! There's no preparation to be made, it's all done, only for sinners who will come and say: 'Just as I am, without one plea'.

You know, if people had heeded the preaching of Noah the Ark wouldn't have been big enough, isn't that right? But I'll tell you, the Lord says that no matter how many people heed and will heed the preaching of the Gospel, this banquet is big enough for them all. There is room in the mercy of God, there's room in the merit of Christ, there's room in the church of God, there's room in heaven. I heard recently of a person being saved with a chequered background, like the woman at the well in John 4, and do you know what an old pharisaical pompous so-called Christian said? And he is a Christian, do you know what I heard him say? 'She's fit for heaven, but not for the church'. Now friend, if that's your theology, you need a new Bible - for Jesus had room for her.

I close with the words of verse 21, what did the servant say? 'It is done' - and oh, that we in the Iron Hall, and I as David Legge, could say to the Lord on the day of judgement: 'Lord, You sent me to the maim, the halt, the blind, the outcasts of society - it's done! I didn't wait for a second command, it's done. I realised my responsibility, and I realised that You were angry with those who You invited and didn't come, and how much more would You be angry with those who hindered people that wanted to come from coming'!

The last sermon that D.L. Moody preached was on this parable - November 23rd 1899, and he called it 'Excuses'. In Kansas City he was standing as a sick man, so much so that he had to hold onto the organ to steady himself, he thought he was going to fall. Just before that great sermon he said to his students at the school in Chicago: 'Never, never have I wanted so much to lead men and women to Christ as I do at this time. I must have souls in Kansas City!'. And as he stood and preached, his heart was throbbing unnaturally in his breast, but there were 50 souls responded to Christ, and the next month he died. At the very end of his life he was compelling people to come in, why? Because the banquet is growing cold, and if we went to them and invited them they would come.

Let's bow our heads together, and I plead with you please: don't let this be just another Sunday sermon. What are we doing to reach the lost? Young people, if there's something in your heart burning, a desire to win the lost, don't you let anyone quench it. Older folk, that desire that was once there, where has it gone? This place that used to be a beacon for the people, among the people, what's happened to us? Have we got respectable? Are we out of touch? Oh, that we would hear the cry of human hearts for the Lord Jesus.

Father, help us, help me, help me to get beyond the facade of the pulpit, and to get down to where the people are. Lord, help us all to follow the Master and be among them to win them, that the common people would hear us gladly, that we would be able to feed them with the living bread as the Lord Jesus did, that we would see the crowd as our Saviour did - till His eyes with tears grew dim, till we see in pity the wandering sheep, and love them for love of Him. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - September 2002

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"Fear"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Mark's gospel - Mark's gospel and chapter 16, which you probably already know is the account of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if you're familiar with the New Testament and with your Bible you'll know that often the gospel writers, when they're writing about one specific situation, often in each gospel there is a different slant put on the story. For instance, you could have an account of a work or a miracle of the Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew's gospel, and then in Mark's gospel you could have the same account but with a different emphasis. The writer, Mark, was trying to get across a different point.

Now, in this account, in Mark chapter 16, of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ there is, I believe, one specific point that the writer wants to get across to those reading his words. So let's look at chapter 16 of Mark, and we will be referring and thinking of the other accounts of the Resurrection, but we're going to specifically look at Mark chapter 16.

Verse 1: "And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid. Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him, as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not. After that he appeared in another form unto two of them, as they walked, and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue", the remainder, "neither believed they them. Afterward he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat, and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen. And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe; In my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; They shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover. So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God. And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen".

Ann Landers was an agony aunt in a tabloid newspaper, and she confessed that every single month that she would write in this agony aunt slot, that she would receive 10,000 letters every month. When she was asked on one occasion: 'What was the subject that predominated all of your letters? What was the problem, and the burden, and the anxiety that most people wrote to you about?', she had no hesitation in answering the question. She said, without one second of thinking about it: 'There is one subject that predominates all: it is the subject of fear'. She said: 'Almost every letter that I receive, the root problem, the root diagnosis at the bottom of it all, is the problem of fear'.

Many doctors think that, indeed, 90% of patients, when they first come into their surgery, the first symptom of their problem or their illness was not a sore throat. It wasn't a pain in the chest, it wasn't a growth; but the first symptom that triggered all the other symptoms was the symptom of fear. If we're honest with ourselves, and if we look at the media, the television, the newspapers, even the billboards around us, we see that our society, perhaps more than any society ever in the history of time, is one that is eaten up with fear. It is one that is burdened and dominated with anxiety and the burden of even life itself, and living itself. Our world around us, and our environment around us, has been dominated, has been obsessed with fears and scares.

You only have to turn the TV on in the past week to see how many more scares there have been. The past decade, perhaps, we have been obsessed and bombarded through the television screen by scares - environmental scares. We've been told the ozone layer is going to cave in and the sun is going to burn us all up. The sea is going to come in from Newcastle and wipe us all out. We've been told about health scares. There was chickens: we had salmonella from our eggs, BSE from our cattle. Now, there's Asian flu from chickens again, and all these health scares. There are military scares. We've got more this week. Saddam Hussein has arisen his head again, making threats. More scares. In the Cold War we had the scare that someone was going to press a button in Russia and we were all going to go up in smoke. Scares!

We in our society today have developed a society, an environment of hypochondriacs of every conceivable kind: people who walk about their daily business in the world around us and they are so paranoid, depressed and conscious and worried about everything that could possibly go wrong - that probably has no probability of going wrong at all! Some people are even going about their daily life with the burden and anxiety of living life itself before them. Many of us have become like Louis XV of France. Louis XV was a man who was so paranoid, so obsessed with the subject of death that he forbade any mention of that subject in his presence. In fact, not only did he forbid the mention of the word, but he took away from his environment every reminder of the subject of death. Every grave, every memorial, every war cenotaph in the palace was taken away because it reminded him of that dreaded subject.

The great leader, dictator, Joseph Stalin, was the same. This was a man who ruled one of the superpowers of the earth, yet this was a man who had eight different bedrooms in which to sleep in. He was so afraid of someone coming one night and assassinating him, or someone poisoning his supper or something like that, that he had eight bedrooms and he would fluctuate from one bedroom to another in case someone came to take his life.

Everything that could possibly go wrong, we think will go wrong. It's alright - isn't it? - to look out at the world and say: 'Well that's the way they think', but do you know something? I believe that so often, not only the behaviour of the world can affect the church, but even in our own day and age the attitudes at times, the psyche, the mind-thoughts of the world are actually filtering in to the church of Jesus Christ. We, as Christians, whether consciously or not, have taken the word of God and have set it aside, and have started adopting the mind, thoughts and attitudes of the world around us. The Lord Jesus Christ said that there would come a time when men's hearts would fail them for fear. You know, I think this morning that, often as Christians, perhaps not literally, but in our everyday daily life our hearts are failing us for fear. It's as if people are just taking us like a wet rag and wringing us out with worry and anxiety. There are things in our life that daily, every single day, eat away at our very character.

I want you to look at this chapter of Scripture that we read together this morning: chapter 16 of Mark. I want you to think of the scene for just a moment. We have, portrayed for us in this gospel, the Easter weekend. We have Good Friday - the death of the Lord - we have Saturday and then we have Sunday. We have here for us a record of what we call nowadays, Easter weekend. I want you to try to think of what the disciples felt like on Good Friday. Try and think about it! The Lord Jesus Christ, in the Garden of Gethsemane:

soldiers come to Him. He has been praying, and they come to Him with swords and with staves and with armour; and they come to take Him away. One of His disciples, Judas, comes and kisses and betrays the Lord Jesus Christ. They take the Lord Jesus Christ, and then a prophecy is fulfilled. The great prophet said that when the Shepherd would be smitten the sheep would scatter. And the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ - the Shepherd of the sheep was taken to be crucified - and what happened? It says that the disciples fled. They dispersed! They disappeared! You couldn't find them anywhere. A handful of them came to the cross to watch Christ die, and the rest deserted Him.

We all know Peter, don't we? He, if you like, is the epitome of the betrayal of the Lord Jesus Christ. We think of him around that fire. We think of the witnesses that came to him and said: 'Was not he with the Lord Jesus Christ?'. We think of the little girl who came and said: 'His speech betrayeth him. He has the speech of a Galilean' - and then he went to the extreme of betraying and denying the Lord Jesus Christ with oaths and with curses. But the rest weren't much better - they ran away. I don't know where they went, but they ran away. They were nowhere to be seen.

But I want you to try to think, just for a moment this morning, on what their feelings and what their thoughts were on Saturday morning. They arose on Saturday morning - if they could even sleep because of their guilt - and they awoke to the realisation that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead. Wherever they were, they were awoken - and can you imagine the thoughts that were coursing through their minds? Perhaps they remembered the Lord's life. Perhaps they remembered the miracles that He did; the miraculous words that fell from His lips; the great teaching that they had received at His feet, for three solid years at the feet of God Incarnate. Perhaps they were reminded of all the great things that He had promised them that He would do in the future, but now all they could think of was these words and the fact that Jesus Christ: He was dead.

Do you know what the supreme irony is? That no matter what acts the Lord Jesus Christ did that they remembered, or no matter what words He spoke that they remembered, they had forgotten some of the most critical words that the Lord Jesus Christ had stressed; especially in Mark's gospel that we have before us this morning. The irony is this: that these disciples had been told, time without number, that after three days, after the death of Christ, in three days He would rise again. But they had forgotten! Those who had heard it in their own ears, who had seen Him demonstrate it with Lazarus with their own eyes, those who had believed on Him in their hearts - the irony is they are the ones who had forgot. And the supreme irony is this: that the ones that had remembered were His enemies.

Turn with me for a moment to Matthew 27 - Matthew 27 and verse 62. Chapter 27 and verse 62; it says: 'Now the next day, that followed the day of the preparation, the chief priests and Pharisees came together unto Pilate, saying, Sir, we remember that that deceiver said, while he was yet alive, After three days I will rise again'. Now, this is the enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ. These are the people who wanted Him dead, who wanted Him six foot under, who wanted Christianity wiped off the face of the earth - and they were the ones who remembered the words that He said: that after three days, 'I will rise again'. If we had time this morning we could go right through all the gospels. We could go to Mark chapter 16, as we read this morning, and if you look at verses 1 to 3 you read that the two Mary's that came to the tomb, they brought with them sweet spices to anoint the body of Jesus. But if you look at verse 1 and verse 2 you see that they came on the third day of the week. That was the day that the Lord said He would rise again! They were coming with the mindset, the assumption, that Jesus was still dead and cold and they were coming to anoint His body. They had forgotten totally that He said: 'On the third day I will rise again'.

If you would go to John 20 you would see Mary Magdalene did not remember either: John 20 and verse 13. You could see that Peter and John, the two disciples who were in the inner circle of the disciples of the Lord Jesus - they themselves had forgotten. The apostles, all the apostles themselves, in Luke chapter 24 we see that they all forgot. When the women came up to the room and told them: 'We have seen the Lord', they

doubted. The two on the road to Emmaus, they talked with this man who they thought was a gardener. They said to Him: 'We thought this man, we thought this one was the deliverer, the Messiah of Israel. Now it is three days and he's still in the grave'. Thomas - doubting Thomas, the man who epitomises doubt for us in our own minds - what did he say? When these women came up and witnessed to the Resurrection of the Lord, he said: 'Except I see the prints in His hands and the scar in His side, and except I thrust my finger into the hands and into His side I will not believe.' They, of all people, had forgotten that Christ had risen from the dead.

If you were to go home this afternoon and look at this passage again - chapter 16 - and count how many times 'fear', or 'affrighted', is mentioned, it would astound you. What Mark is trying to get across, this morning, is the fear of the disciples - how they were so afraid because of the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ was dead, what it meant for them. This day, Saturday, when they woke up, when they realised Christ was dead; they realised suddenly that their dream was over. They realised that the deliverer who had promised to deliver them - He was now dead and gone. Suddenly, at that moment, despair, depression that they had never experienced before in their life, it came across them like a cloud. It seemed that there wasn't a glimmer of hope. It was a dark tunnel that they were thrust in, that there was no light at the end of; and that Saturday - that Saturday brought great depression that to them, at that point, they could not lift.

The Saturday after Good Friday, the next day, was a day of desolation. It was a day of shattered dreams. It was a day of gloom. It was a day of inertia. For Mary the mother of Jesus, a sword had pierced her heart as she saw her beloved son die. Would she not have thought of the angel visiting her and promising her that the seed that was in her - that one, that little embryo - would be the deliverer who would bruise the head of Satan and bring victory over sin? But now that dream was over. For Peter, perhaps, his heart welled up in guilt as he thought of the fact that his Lord was dead, and he betrayed Him and perhaps if he hadn't betrayed Him, what might have happened? He might have lived.

I wonder have you ever heard of the rhyme: 'Monday's child is fair of face, Tuesday's child is full of grace, Wednesday's child is full of woe'? Well, these were Saturday's children. Saturday's children were full of despair, full of tragedy. Their dream was shattered and their dream was over. Can I ask you this morning; have you ever experienced anything like that? Perhaps you haven't experienced anything as earth shattering as Messiah dying, but perhaps you have experienced a loved one dying. Perhaps you've experienced a shattered dream: what you thought was going to be the future and suddenly, in a split second, it was all over and you just didn't know what was going to happen. Or perhaps you just have a fear that something is going to happen, and you're taken up with anxious thoughts and worries.

Have you ever felt depression like this? You know, there are people living today in our society who live in despair and darkness - the darkness of Saturday. They walk about their daily business. They are Saturday's children. Saturday's cities in our world are teeming places of misery and gloom. People in their daily lives, living for themselves, are walking, as it were, a ritual dance to death with an illusion that they think at the end of it there will be hope; only to die and find hell. We live in a godless world; a world that is full of despair; a world where fear grips people from day to day; hopelessness and meaninglessness crush people on every side. Can I ask you believer, this morning, are you one of Saturday's children? Are you like this?

Well, if you are I want to tell you some good news. Turn with me to Romans chapter 1 for a moment - Romans chapter 1 and we'll read from verse 1. It's verse 4 I want to look at, but we'll read from verse 1 to get the context. Romans 1 verse 1: "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; and declared" - now, if you ring your Bible, ring that word! "And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead".

'Declared'! Now, that little word 'declared', in the Greek, is a word - this word: 'horizthentos' (sp?). 'Horizthentos' - that is the word that we get our English word 'horizon' from. Horizthentos - horizon. You can nearly read this verse like this. Verse 3: 'Concerning His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord...who was horizoned to be the Son of God with power...by the resurrection from the dead'. Jesus Christ was horizoned as the Son of God with power because of his resurrection.

What's your horizon this morning? What is a horizon? Well, a horizon is a boundary, isn't it? It's a boundary in the environment, in the landscape, that you can't see any further. It says 'thus far and no further you can't see'. It's something that stops you. It's a boundary around you, and that's what a horizon is. Can I ask you what your horizon is? What is your boundary? What is the thing that seems to stop you from getting anywhere for God? What is the thing that seems to stop you, even in your own life, getting rid of fears and getting rid of worry and anxiousness? What is that boundary? This verse says - listen to this - that Christ has been horizoned. He has been made your horizon. When Christ came out of the grave He became your boundary, He became your restriction, He became your horizon!

In the school I went to we had a swimming pool. When I went to the school I couldn't swim, but when I left the school I could swim because they just threw you in and let you get on with it! But when I was in the swimming pool I used to wear goggles (not these ones now!), swimming goggles, and they always came off when I got to the deep end. They used to plummet right to the bottom of the deep end - and I used to think: 'Here we go again!'. What I used to do was (I'm sure you know what it's like to do this) I tipped up and when right down to the bottom of the pool, further and further down. The further down you get you feel the weight of the water above you, and then you feel the pressure of the water and your ears start to feel funny, and your nose starts to feel funny. The further down you get you feel that you can go no more, and you just grab the goggles and turn up, and you feel this awesome force pushing you - and it just pushes you right out of the water until you thrust through the surface into the air. That was just like the resurrection of the Lord Jesus - only a thousand times more. Because when the Lord Jesus Christ was risen from the dead there was a spiritual law that was set in motion. It's this: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Now, I want you to get that: His humiliation set in motion His own law of exaltation. Philippians 2 is an example of that. It says Christ humbled Himself and became obedient unto death - His humiliation - even the death of the cross. But His humiliation at the cross necessitated His exaltation. "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name".

You know, the Resurrection was exactly the same. Christ had been humbled unto death, even the death of the cross. It was if Christ was being pushed further down and down and down in His life. He could be pushed no further down than this death that He had suffered with the sins of the world upon His shoulder. As He is pushed down and down and down, there is this compulsion and this power of His exaltation that, as it were, thrusts Him out of the grave! As Romans says, He becomes the horizon of everyone who trusts in Him. His humiliation set into motion His exaltation. Matthew's gospel says at that moment when He thrust out of the grave, when the grave could hold Him no longer, that there was a great earthquake. It says that the guards that stood there, it says that their legs shook and they became as dead men. Think of it! The ones who were living became dead, and the one who was dead became alive! In that split second, because Christ had to be exalted for the stoop that He took, life came into those stick-like dead bones and into that cold flesh, and Christ had risen again.

But there's something that I want you to see in our passage. Chapter 16 - Mark chapter 16: because this is just beautiful. Mark chapter 16 and verse 7, and the angel said to these women after the Lord had risen again: "But go your way, tell His disciples and Peter". Now, why did he item out Peter there? Why did he emphasise Peter there? 'Go and tell His disciples and Peter'? Can you imagine, when these two women came into the upper room and told them and said: 'Listen, he wanted me specifically to tell you, Peter, that He had

risen again'? Can you imagine what that would have felt like for Peter? One who was despairing, one who was degraded, one whose mind was perplexed with fear and was twisted with the turmoil of the fact that he had betrayed the Lord of Glory; and now the Lord of Glory had sent a message to tell him, 'Peter, I've risen again!'.

Do you know what the resurrection meant for Peter? It meant this: that the Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord Jesus Christ, can overcome the greatest enemies: death and hell, by His resurrection. If He can overcome death and hell, what is there in our life that we cannot overcome by the power of His resurrection? What is there? What horizon is too heavy for the Christ to push away as He comes out of the grave? These were Saturday's children. Think of that! These were Saturday's children a few moments before. They were depressed, they were despairing, but then they became Sunday's children! The children, who, it says in the Acts of the Apostles, turned the world upside down. What a change the resurrection made to them!

Someone has said: 'Sunday's children are the arguments the world understands and the world needs'. What is your day? Are you living in the darkness, the pessimism, the hopelessness of Saturday, or are you living in the bounding life and irrepressible hope of Sunday, the Lord's Day? For the disciples it seemed that everything had ended in tragedy. Nothing else could have changed their sad hearts but life coming and coursing through the body of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know something believer, this morning? The resurrection, for us, is everything. Do you believe that? The resurrection means everything, and so much of the time when we preach the gospel we say: 'Don't forget the cross!' - and we should never forget the cross, but we forget the Resurrection! Paul said that 'if Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain and our faith is also vain; and we, of all men, are most miserable'. It means everything. Do you know why? Because if the cross, the blood of Christ, took our sins away and took the power out of sin, the resurrection of Christ puts God's power into us! It thrusts the life of God into a dead sinner, and we are made alive.

Do you know what Paul's request was? He said, 'above all things' - he said he counted everything in this world: ambition, achievement, status, even health, he said he counted it all but dung! Why? That he might know Him - and what else? - and the power of His resurrection! Believer, this morning, do you know the power of His resurrection? I know you know it in your head, but do you know the resurrection power of Jesus Christ in your life from day to day? Do you know that power that changed Christ from dead to living? Do you know that supernatural power in your life? Do you know that you can?

Oh, the resurrection means so much and I could go on telling you what it means to the Saviour: what it makes Him, and what it means to the sinner, and what it means for Satan, and what it means for the Sabbath, and what it means for baptism. But let me ask you in closing: are you living in Saturday, in the shadow and the dearth of Saturday? Or will you live in the shadow of the risen Lord Jesus Christ in your life? Will you let Him be your horizon? Will you let the dynamite of the resurrection explode your faith? Will you let its floods and fires cremate your anxieties? Will you let its waters come unto your dry and thirsty land in your life? Will you let the resurrection of Christ make a difference in your life, until we face the ultimate horizon that is death?

I read once about a man who was facing that horizon, and I just want to finish with this: telling you what he said, because this was a man who knew the power of the resurrection. A man called Dr W.B. Hinson (sp?) was speaking from his pulpit only a year after commencing his ministry in this specific church. He was told that week by a doctor - he said: 'This week you will go to your death'. He writes this: 'I remember a year ago when a man in this city said, 'You have got to go to your death'. I walked out to where I live, 5 miles out of this city, and I looked across at that mountain I love, and I looked at the river in which I rejoice, and I looked at the stately trees that are always God's poetry to my soul. Then in the evening, I looked up into the great sky where God was lighting His lamps and I said, 'I may not see you many more times but, mountain, I shall be alive when you are gone. River, I shall be alive when you cease running towards the sea. Stars, I shall be alive when you have fallen from your great sockets in the great down-pulling of the material universe'.

Do you know what this man knew? He knew what Job knew. He could cry: 'I know that my Redeemer liveth!'. Do you know, and does knowing make a difference? I pray this morning to God that it will. Let's bow our head and commit ourselves to the Lord.

Our Father, we thank Thee for the Lord Jesus Christ: our risen and exalted Head, the only Head of the church, the only one whom we worship, and the only one who is risen from the dead. Lord, we thank You for what that means to us, for the life that He gives us, for the justification that He has achieved for us by His Resurrection, for the fact that as He is risen so we also will rise and meet Him one day in the air - and so we will forever be with the Lord. We - wonder of wonders - we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. Lord, let us see Him now as we wait around His table. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by Trevor Veale, Preach The Word - June 2001

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"Treasures In The Family Tree Of Christ"

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I wanted to bring something before you along the Christmas theme, and this is, I believe, the leading of the Lord that I bring before you what I've called 'Treasures in the Family Tree Of Christ'. We begin our reading at verse 1 of Matthew chapter 1. Now there's a lot of strange names in this first chapter of Matthew, so bear with me because I believe that out of the depths of all this difficulty we'll dig out some treasures this morning.

Verse 1: "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas", or that could be translated 'Judah', "and his brethren; And Judah begat Phares and Zara of Tamar", drop the 'h' there, 'Tamar', "and Phares begat Esrom; and Esrom begat Aram; And Aram begat Aminadab; and Aminadab begat Naasson; and Naasson begat Salmon; And Salmon begat Boaz of Rachab", or that could be better translated 'Rahab', drop the 'c' and it looks more familiar, 'Rahab', "and Boaz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; And Jesse begat David the king; and David the king begat Solomon of her that had been the wife of Urias; And Solomon begat Roboam; and Roboam begat Abia; and Abia begat Asa; And Asa begat Josaphat; and Josaphat begat Joram; and Joram begat Ozias; And Ozias begat Joatham; and Joatham begat Achaz; and Achaz begat Ezekias; And Ezekias begat Manasses; and Manasseh", better translated, "begat Amon; and Amon begat Josias; And Josias begat Jechonias and his brethren, about the time they were carried away to Babylon: And after they were brought to Babylon, Jechonias begat Salathiel; and Salathiel begat Zorobabel; And Zorobabel begat Abiud; and Abiud begat Eliakim; and Eliakim begat Azor; And Azor begat Sadoc; and Sadoc begat Achim; and Achim begat Eliud; And Eliud begat Eleazar; and Eleazar begat Matthan; and Matthan begat Jacob; And Jacob begat Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David until the carrying away into Babylon are fourteen generations; and from the carrying away into Babylon unto Christ are fourteen generations. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a public example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS".

I want you also to turn with me, we're not reading from this at the moment, but Luke chapter 3 - and I want you to put your Bible bookmark or your little ribbon in your Bible in Luke chapter 3, and keep your Bible open at Matthew chapter 1 as we look at these treasures in the family tree of Christ.

The tendency as we read through the word of God, whether it be the Old Testament or the New Testament, is to skip out the difficult passages. It would have been very easy for me in the public reading of the word of God this morning to skip out all those difficult names and not make the mistakes, perhaps, that I did in reading them - because it seems tedious, and there seems to be little profit in reading such genealogies. The tendency usually is, when you're doing your daily Bible reading - I hope you do do that - is to skip over such

verses of Scripture, but what we must always remind ourselves, and hopefully we'll see the proof of this today, as 2 Timothy chapter 3 verse 16 tells us: all Scripture, all scripture, is given by inspiration of God and is profitable. It's profitable for many things, Paul says to Timothy that it's profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness - but we must conclude that no matter how difficult the passage or the reading might be, or on a little glance on the surface no matter how little spiritual truth we may think there to be in a passage, all scripture which is inspired by God is profitable.

So we have to ask the question: why are these genealogies and names given at the very beginning of Matthew's gospel. In fact they're given in Matthew as a sort of preface, as an introduction, almost like a book in itself at the beginning of this gospel of Matthew. Many of you will know that people at times, even in our own generation, take up the hobby of tracing ancestors because they're curious about where they've come from. One genealogist by the name of Mr Stewart said: 'It's a matter of personalising history'. When we look back at our genealogies, our family trees, we begin to personalise history and we can set ourselves into our family tree maybe hundreds or thousands of years back as to where we came from.

Now if you're wondering the importance of a family tree such as this at the beginning of Matthew's gospel, all you need to do is read letter that was called 'Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho'. Justin Martyr was an early Christian, and he wrote a letter to a Jew trying to convince him of the legitimacy of the claim of the Lord Jesus Christ to the title of Messiah or Christ - that Jew was called 'Trypho'. A great deal of this letter was expounding Matthew's gospel chapter 1 to prove that the Lord Jesus Christ was in the line of David, and He was who He said He was: Messiah. That tells us alone the importance that such a genealogy was to the early Christians right there at the beginning of Christianity, because as Justin Martyr proved to Trypho the Jew, these verses of Scripture from verse 1 to 17 of chapter 1 of Matthew trace the ancestry of our Lord Jesus Christ right back to David the King, and they connect our Lord Jesus with all of the messianic prophecies that are given in the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now if you're not sure about the importance of such verses, I want you to turn with me very quickly to chapter 22, chapter 22 of Matthew and verse 41. The Lord Jesus posed this question to the Jews: 'While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he?'. So the Lord was asking them to say who is Christ to be the son of in lineage, in genealogy. And of course they reply: 'They say unto him, The son of David'. Now, therefore, when we trace the lineage of our Lord Jesus Christ back to David what is it other than proof that the Lord Jesus is and was who He said He was? You can imagine as Justin Martyr, this early Christian, wrote this letter to this Jew who was unbelieving, the importance of the lineage of our Lord that was tracing His ancestry right back to King David and was proving that He was qualified to be the Messiah, and that all the prophecies of the Old Testament Scriptures could be legitimately linked with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now let's delve a little deeper into the significance of this lineage in chapter 1. If you remember that Matthew's gospel is primarily the gospel to the Jew, the gospel of the King of the Jews to the kingdom, you will see how important it is that in chapter 1 and verse 1 the Lord Jesus' lineage is taken from Abraham. Matthew starts with Abraham. When you go to Mark's gospel there is no genealogy of the Lord Jesus because Mark is more concerned with the servanthood of our Lord Jesus, and as he goes quickly through his gospel you see that little word over and over again: 'immediately, immediately, immediately' - he hasn't really the time to put a genealogy in, it doesn't serve his purpose in his gospel. But as we turn to Luke's gospel which has traditionally been understood as the gospel of the man Christ Jesus, homing in on the humanity of the Lord Jesus, and you look at chapter 3 of Luke's gospel and verse 38 you see that he begins his genealogy not with Abraham, but because he's speaking of Jesus the man he starts his genealogy with Adam, the first man.

Of course, Luke's gospel is primarily written to Gentiles, so Luke goes beyond even Abraham, the first Jew that was ever called, he goes right back to the father of all humanity - Adam himself. Of course, as you go into John's gospel there's no genealogies per se, but because John is dealing primarily with the divine Christ from all eternity, the Word that was with God and was God, John gives Christ His beginning before the worlds began, and His lineage - as far as John is concerned - is from all eternity past. So we see the different emphasis in these gospels. As Matthew writes this genealogy, he's writing to Jews and he starts the genealogy at Abraham. Incidentally, if you look at chapter 3 of Luke's gospel you see that it's in a different order - he seems to go backwards to the way that Matthew does in chapter 1 of his gospel. The reason why that is is that the genealogy of a man that you find in Luke chapter 3 always goes from the son to the father, so it starts with Jesus and he works back to the fathers. But in Matthew's gospel we have the lineage and the genealogy of a King, and whenever the genealogy of a King was given it was always from the fathers down to that king, whoever the son was. That's why we start with Abraham, so if you get that into your mind first of all: that Matthew is speaking to the Jew, and he is speaking about the King of the Jews that came down from Abraham.

If you keep that in your mind, right away we have a treasure of genealogy - that's the first treasure I want to bring out of this passage: the treasure of genealogy. You see, the reason why Matthew brings us the genealogy of a King is that he is trying to prove the legal right of the Lord Jesus Christ to be Messiah, to be the heir to David's throne, and he does this through Joseph. We have in Matthew chapter 1 the genealogy of Jesus Christ to David through the person of Joseph, His father, His earthly father that is of course. When you go to Luke's genealogy it's the genealogy of Mary tracing back to David - people often ask: 'What's the difference between the genealogy in chapter 1 of Matthew and Luke chapter 3?'. The difference is that chapter 1 of Matthew is Joseph's genealogy to David, and chapter 3 of Luke is Mary's genealogy to David.

Now I know if you look at verse 31 of chapter 3 of Luke you will see that it talks about Heli, or it could be translated 'Eli', as the father of Joseph - but that really is the father-in-law of Joseph. Eli was a relative of Mary, an in-law, a father-in-law of Joseph. So you have here in Matthew Joseph's lineage right back to David, and you have in Luke Mary's lineage right back to David. Now what's that saying? That both Mary and Joseph were in the line to the throne of David - both of them! The two writers are proving, in Matthew the Lord Jesus' legal right to the throne of David through Joseph His father, and Luke is proving the natural right by flesh of Jesus being related to David so that He could be Messiah.

Now you may be a little confused, but let me try and iron it all out for you. Isaiah chapter 7 and verse 14 is quoted in this passage, and you'll hear it read probably tonight: 'Behold the virgin shall be with child'. It wasn't only necessary that the Lord Jesus be born of a virgin, but He had to be born of a virgin of David's line. He had to be physically related to King David - but here's where the problem comes in: a woman could never ever be an heir to the throne. It didn't matter that in Luke's gospel we have Mary related to David all the way back, she could never be an heir to the throne - so not only should the Messiah have to be born of a virgin, and born of a virgin that was related by flesh and blood to David the King, but that virgin that was in the Davidic line had to also be married to a man who was equally related to David in the Davidic line.

This is truly a treasure of genealogy, and it has thrilled my heart this week as I have studied it, because Matthew proves that our Lord Jesus - through Joseph as His legal father in the eyes of the nation - was legally the heir to the throne of David and could be qualified as Messiah. He was born of Mary, so he was naturally of the line of David and was naturally able to be the Messiah. Do you see the perfection of the great plan of God? Even though Mary couldn't be qualified to be an heir to the throne, God married to Mary, Joseph, so that He could be legally Messiah. My friends, this is wonderful because the prophets demanded that there should be a virgin birth, and we right away would say: 'Well, then He could never be related naturally to the line of David, He could never be related legally'. The law demanded that there was a fleshly lineage to the Davidic throne, and this is something that man could never have conceived in his human mind

- to bring forth Messiah from the virgin's womb, but that that virgin should be related to David naturally and she should marry a man, Joseph, related to David legally and royally.

There you have it, and let me say categorically today: it is absolutely fundamental and essential that He was born of the virgin, no matter what the BBC will say tonight - and I'm not urging you to watch it. It is essential for who He was and who He is! But does it not warm your heart that all this is brought together in the supernatural providence of God, and I'll tell you better than this: God has left no room for any other man to claim to be Messiah, no room. Apart from the fact that it's proved here in this genealogy, when the Jews rejected the Lord Jesus what happened? In AD70 the Romans were allowed to come and absolutely destroy the whole city, destroy the temple, destroy the nation and disperse them - and with that their genealogical records were all destroyed as well! If a man in Judaism was to stand up today and say: 'I am Messiah, I go right back to the line of David', it could never be proved - but it's proved here!

No wonder the Lord said: 'Many shall rise and call themselves Christ, but it will all be unfounded'. What a treasure of genealogy we have here, does it thrill your heart to see it in the word of God? Perfection! Man would say: 'It's an impossibility', but God brings all these impossibilities together and sets His Son in the midst of it. Now the careful eye will look down this passage and see that there are three omissions of names that should be there. The name Ahaziah, Joash and Amaziah are in the Old Testament, but they're not found here. Don't get confused or disconcerted about it, because just because this says 'begat' does not mean it was a direct relationship of father and son, they can skip a couple of generations in these type of genealogies that you have in the Scriptures. But why are these three men left out? I could go into many reasons why they are left out, but I'll give you the reason which I think is primary in Matthew's mind that he left them out: they were three descendants of the daughter of the wicked King Ahab, whose name was Athaliah. Without going into undue detail, let me just tell you this: Athaliah desired to annihilate the kingly seed of the house of Judah. In other words, because Christ would come from the tribe of Judah, Athaliah decided that she would wipe them all out. We could call it anti-messianity, just like anti-Christianity, and anti-Christ today, they were trying to destroy the line of Messiah - just as Cain tried to do, the devil did through Cain when he slew Abel; just as we come into the Nativity story and Herod tries to slay all those man children to try to stop the bringing to fruition of the fulfilment of prophetic scripture in the Lord Jesus.

God doesn't have them here, isn't that amazing? Because, as Galatians 4:4 says: 'When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law'. As we heard this morning around the table, the darkness couldn't prevent it no matter how much it tried. Oh, isn't it wonderful? But I have three more treasures to bring to you in the time that's left. The second is a treasure of numerology. Genealogy is the study of generations, numerology is the study of numbers. If you look at verse 17 there are three fourteens mentioned. All the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen; from David until the carrying away of Babylon are fourteen; from the carrying away of Babylon to Christ are fourteen. Now I think that one of the reasons why Matthew breaks it into three fourteens is for memorisation, because these early Christians had to memorise this to debate with Jews about the lineage of our Lord Jesus. I think that that's one of the reasons why he does this.

If you can't get fourteen, the reason is that David ends the first list and starts the second list, and Jechonias ends the second list and starts the third - but that's by the way. If you add these three fourteens together the number that you get is the number 42. You have to be very careful in the study of numbers in scripture that you don't go overboard, but let me just say this: 42 in the scripture represents the experience of sufferings. Now I know that the number 40 represents trial - the Israelites were 40 years in the wilderness, the trial that they had; the Lord Jesus was fasting 40 days and 40 nights and then His temptation came. But those trials don't always have to have necessary deep sufferings, it could just be a trial - but 42 speaks specifically of great sufferings. As you go into the book of Revelation it talks about 42 months, which is the three and a half years of the second half of the tribulation period - Jacob's trouble. No other period of suffering has ever been

seen on the earth - and the idea is not just that it's a period of suffering, but that the 43rd period - after 42, after the suffering - the 43rd period is the period of rest.

Now, my friends, as you get this in this genealogy you have 42 generations from Abraham right down to Christ, but the 43rd is rest! Isn't it wonderful? Rest in Christ! We could go on: two times seven is fourteen, you have three fourteens here - and I hope I'm not pushing this but I don't believe I am, most of the conservative evangelical scholars see this in these numbers. Seven is the perfect number in Judaism, perfection, completeness. There is no disorder with the Spirit of God, God is not the author of confusion, and as you look at the Bible you see much of Israel's history is broken into sevens. There were 70 years of captivity in Babylon, there are 70 prophetic weeks in Daniel, the last week of that 70 prophetic weeks is broken into seven years. Here you have in these fourteens, two times seven three times over. If seven is perfection, two times seven three times over - what must that mean? Absolute and complete fulfilment in Christ!

My friend, Christ has fulfilled it all - and if that's not enough for you: David, the name David is mentioned, the all-important name - and I didn't say that now! - but to Judaism the all-important kingly name is mentioned five times in this genealogy. You may not know this, but in personal names letters in Hebrew represent numbers. The letter 'd' represents 4 - they never take vowels by the way, so drop the 'a' - the letter 'v' represents 6, drop the 'i', the letter 'd' represents 4 again - you add it all up, what number you get? Fourteen! Fourteen, and I wonder is that the reason why Matthew puts this right throughout his genealogy, that all of this points to the fulfilment of Christ as in the line of David as Messiah, and isn't it amazing that not just the names fulfil scripture, but the very numbers in it fulfil it!

Let me give you another treasure, a treasure of typology. Genealogy is the study of generations, numerology the study of numbers, typology is the study of types - and a type in the Bible is just a figure, a symbol of something that is future, pointing towards something that is distant. If you look at verse 1 it says: 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ'. If you turn with me to Genesis chapter 5 and verse 1, you read here: 'This is the book of the generations of Adam'. Now if you read down this generation of Adam it has the word 'begat', but it often has 'and he died...and he died...and he died'. This is a generation of death that came upon all men via sin, through Adam our forefather; but as you turn to Matthew this is a new generation, the generation of Jesus Christ. That word 'generation', which is the literal word 'genesis', is only found twice in the whole Bible - once in the Old Testament, Genesis 5 and 1; and once in the New Testament, Matthew 1 and 1. What Adam had wrought on humanity by his original sin, now the last Adam is coming in through the Nativity of Christ, born in Bethlehem, to undo and reverse everything in contrast to the first Adam.

What typology there is in this! I haven't got time to dwell on that because there's something further I want you to see. 'The generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, and the son of Abraham'. Now you think of David and think of Abraham for a moment, and you will remember from your knowledge of the Old Testament that both of them were promised sons - isn't that right? Both of them were promised sons. Abraham was promised a son in Isaac, and Abraham's son in Isaac was a promise of what? A racial line of Jewish people that would number greater than the sand of the shore and the stars of the sky. Abraham speaks of the racial line of the Jew, that there was this nation that would spring up and be a blessing to all nations. But go further into the typology of Isaac for a moment, remember Abraham took Isaac in Genesis 22 and offered him upon the altar to God - the father was offering the son. He had faith, we read in Hebrews 11, to believe that God could raise that child up from the dead again if he was caused to slay it. So there's not only death and offering and sacrifice, but there's resurrection.

Isaac married a woman called Rebekah, and Rebekah was not a Hebrew. Rebekah in these days was a Gentile, Isaac's name means 'laughter' - and I believe the significance of that was forever to be a witness to Abraham of the utter impossibility of this birth to a barren womb like Sarah's. As far as Abraham was

concerned the name 'Isaac' meant this, listen: the merging of human and the divine. The Scriptures say that Sarah received power to conceive seed when she was past age. Can you see the typology in all of this?

Let me go on: what about David's son? Well this is the royal line, King David. His son was promised and came, and his name was Solomon, and his name means 'peaceful'. Solomon's greatest endowment was wisdom, and his specific life's work was building the temple. His reign was characteristic of peace and prosperity on the nation. Do you see the typology? Do you see the significance? But let me stop you here and warn you for a moment, because what was in Abraham's heart and David's heart failed! Have you got it? The promise of their sons didn't come to fruition in the son, because you see in the Old Testament the weakness of Isaac's character, the appalling failure of his sons right throughout the whole ages of Judaism - and he failed to really grasp the promises that God had given to his father Abraham. Look at Solomon, and in spite of all his wisdom and gifts from God his life is an unutterable and appalling failure! The temple that he built to glorify God became a centre which was a form of godliness without the power because of his sin, and his sin ultimately caused the fall of the Davidic dynasty.

My friend, if you see in this genealogy the treasure of typology pointing towards another who would perfectly fulfil all the promises that were given to Abraham's sons and David's sons - and who is He? Let me remind you of His words: 'Before Abraham was I am', 'A greater than Solomon is here'. He realised and fulfilled all the purposes that were failed in Isaac, Solomon, and all after him. In His sacrifice, in His glorious resurrection, marrying a Gentile bride, building a spiritual temple and sending forth His Holy Spirit into it to give it the power that was necessary. What I want you to see today is that all the aspirations and incompetence of men has been overcome, and even Abraham the founder of the religion, and David the king of the religion, look to Christ, and have to look to Christ for the full fulfilment of all of God's purposes and promises. Abraham, the father of faith, fades out of sight when he sees his faith vindicated in Jesus Christ. The government of David, which perpetually failed, waits for Christ administration on the earth. The captivity was wrought in the time of Babylon, through which the people of God sighed and sobbed in agony, waits for emancipation - and it is all fulfilled in Christ!

You have through these time periods the judges, the kings, the priests, theocracy, monarchy, hierarchy, and what Matthew is simply saying is that all these things have been pointing toward the Lord Jesus, and now they are all fulfilled in Him - and then he starts his gospel to tell you all about it! No wonder the hymnwriter said:

'Hail to the Lord's anointed,
Great David's greater Son.
Hail in the time appointed
His reign on earth begun.

He comes to break oppression,
To set the captives free,
To take away transgression,
And rule in equity'.

Here's the last treasure - a treasure of genealogy, a treasure of numerology, a treasure of typology - and here's the last, but not least, and I want to give you it: the treasure of soteriology. Soteriology is the study of salvation. If you realise that in the ancient near east, in Palestine in Jesus' day, a woman was not a person, she was a thing. She was seen as a possession of her father or her husband, and they could do with her as they pleased. Certainly a woman was never ever to be included within Jewish pedigree, and you would never find a woman in the genealogies of a Jew. In fact, one of the morning prayers of a Jewish man was: 'Lord, I thank You that You haven't made me a Gentile, You haven't made me a slave, and You haven't made me a

woman'. Well, if there was to be a woman in the genealogy of Christ, you would have thought perhaps that it would have been a noble and devoted woman that you would find in the Old Testament - maybe Sarah or Rebekah, or Deborah, or as Hebrews 11 says: 'women that received their dead raised to life again, and others who were tortured not accepting deliverance'. In the genealogy of the one who would be the seed of the woman that would bruise the serpent's head and would be Messiah, you would think you would find some great woman of esteem - but can I tell you today, look carefully: there are four women, and three of them at least are not marked by holiness, but they are marked by shame - and the fourth belongs to a race that was cursed by the law of God.

In the closing moments let me give you those four women. Look at verse 3: 'Judah begat Phares and Zara of Tamar' - there's the woman, Tamar. If you go into the Old Testament Scriptures, Genesis 38 - don't turn to it now - you will read a story there. Tamar was the daughter-in-law of Judah, and she was married to a man who died. He displeased the Lord, so the Lord slew him. In those days if your husband died your brother-in-law had to marry you and raise up seed to your husband. So her brother-in-law came to her, Obed, but he did not raise up seed for her. The Lord was displeased, and the Lord struck him down, and then Judah promised: 'See when that little boy, the other brother that's left, when he goes up I'll give you to him as your wife' - but when he grew up Judah didn't do it, and she was displeased. The Bible says she went out, knew where Judah was travelling one day, disguised herself as a prostitute, slept with him and bore up seed to her father-in-law - incest, adultery, fornication, seduction, you name it, it's in the book. She is in the genealogy of our Lord Jesus. You say: 'What could possibly qualify her to be in the genealogy of the Lord?' - do you want to hear it? The only thing that qualifies her to be there is her shame, her shame.

Let me give you the second one, verse 5: 'Rahab' - Joshua chapter 2. You read about the spies who went to spy in Jericho when they went into the home of this harlot at Rahab, and they were given a place to stay and she hid them from the people in Jericho and from the king. Because of that they had grace upon her, and they said that they wouldn't slay her house and her family if she put a red ribbon or red rope in the window of her home - but the Bible tells us that it was by faith that the harlot Rahab perished not like them who believed not, when she received the spies with peace. She was a harlot, full of abominations, so why is she in the genealogy of Christ? Here's why: faith! That's all, faith.

Look at the third one, verse 5b: 'Ruth' - now there's no stain of character on Ruth, but her problem is she is a Moabitess, and the law of Moses was against the Moabites and cursed them. In fact Deuteronomy 23 verse 3 says: 'An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord, even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord forever'. But faith brought Ruth into the Lord's people along with her children, and the third generation after her - her great grandson - is King David himself! What the law had cursed, grace set aside and brought her in. Oh, this is tremendous!

The fourth in verse 6, it just says 'her of Uriah' - and of course you know the wife of Uriah the Hittite was Bathsheba, that David committed adultery with. I believe that David is in view here and not Bathsheba, it doesn't even mention her name - and I believe what's being talked about here is the sin of a believing man. Here you have the believing King David whose lineage we have before us, but even he can fall into the depths of sin and shame, yet he's here! His backsliding that he committed, it didn't disqualify him from grace! I'll tell you, if Matthew has anything to tell us from his genealogy it's this: the treasures of salvation. I believe that he deliberately picked out the dregs of humanity to show that it is faith that lays hold of salvation, deliverance from the law is through faith, and even in the case of a believer that falls, the assurance of salvation is through faith. Grace shines through it all, nothing but grace we can see in this genealogy - four women who are sinners, four women who are Gentiles - and we could almost sing with Hannah today: 'He lifteth up the needy from a dunghill to make them sit with princes and inherit the throne of glory'. Matthew's purpose in this genealogy is not to cover-up the outrageous sin of some of the ancestors of Jesus, but to emphasise them; that on the human side of Jesus' ancestry was part of the world.

Later as we read, verse 18 on, he emphasises that He was apart from sin and He came to redeem us. But let me ask you in the closing two minutes of our meeting: this Christmas time, does this bring any commentary or deepen your understanding of a verse like this concerning the incarnation of Christ: 'He came in the likeness of sinful flesh'. John 1, what about this one? 'He came unto His own'. You have it in the His lineage, but let me say this - and I am on holy ground, and I be careful, but I tell you this - on the authority of this passage I can say it: He was not only the friend of publicans and sinners, but He was related to them. He was related to them! Apart from sin, in His lineage He associates with the sinner - what an illustration and symbol of the gospel that the division between Jew and Gentile is broken down, male and female, clean and unclean - for He is not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Is it any wonder then, in verse 21, God gives Him the name JESUS - Jehovah is salvation.

Now listen: if you can't come and adore Him after that, I don't know what's wrong with you.

Lord Jesus, we fall at Thy feet this day and worship Thee for who Thou art - from eternity past the Eternal Son of God, the Word of God who has neither beginning or end; but yet in time the one who is the rightful heir of the throne of David, the one who came in the likeness of our sinful flesh to redeem those that are under the law. Oh Lord we thank Thee, thank Thee for dying for us, thank Thee for rising again, we thank Thee for everything that Thou art and all that Thou hast fulfilled. We pray that this Christmas time that Thy Spirit will give us a deeper appreciation of the treasures of the unsearchable riches of Christ. Amen.

Transcribed by Andrew Watkins, Preach The Word - January 2003

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"At Ease In Zion"

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Now we're turning in our Bibles to Amos, the book of Amos - I'll give you a wee bit of time to find that, it's a hard one to find. There's Hosea, then Joel, then the book of Amos - and chapter 6. Amos chapter 6, verse one - but before we read the word of God, let's bow in a word of prayer and ask the Lord's help as we come to His word this morning. Let us pray: Our Father, to make our weak hearts strong and brave, send the fire. To live a dying world to save, send the fire. Oh, see us on Thy altar laid, our lives, our all this very day. To crown, the offering now we pray, send the fire. In Jesus name, Amen.

Amos chapter 6 and verse one - I believe that this is the message that God has laid upon my heart to bring to you this morning. Again, like some of the messages I've brought before, it's not a very comfortable message - but God never promised that we would have an easy ride. Amos chapter 6 and verse one: 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion, and trust in the mountain of Samaria, which are named chief of the nations, to whom the house of Israel came!'. It's just that wee sentence: 'Woe to them that are at ease in Zion'.

I want to take you on a journey this morning, a journey to Palestine. Twenty-five years before the fall of the nation of Israel, I want us to come and to visit a little city called Bethel. A small city, a small city where there is a chapel, and within that chapel sits a king whose name is King Jeroboam II. A chapel like Balmoral Palace, it was his local home where he went to enjoy a vacation, like our Queen. His priest was a man called Amaziah - if you like, that man was the Archbishop of Canterbury, in our terms. And I want to take you there this morning - twenty-five years before the fall of Israel - and we walk into the front of the chapel, just like this church, and we see right at the front of it this man, King Jeroboam II. And the priest is standing there at the lectern, he's about to lead the service - a majestic service is about to begin - there are instruments, there are singers, there are chanters, there are readers there. And then suddenly, just before Amaziah is about to speak, we all hear a commotion outside the building - a bit like Portadown! - and we all run outside the building to see what is going on, there's so much noise, there's so much commotion - and when we run out we see there: a man. A man standing on his own, with no one with him - and all that we can hear is this shout: 'Woe unto you that are at ease in Zion for judgement is coming and this evil nation that once trusted in God is going to be judged by God Himself!'.

We look him up and down, we don't see anything special, we just see a man - a rustic, hill-open-air preacher - his name is 'Burdened', that's what Amos means, 'burdened'. He wasn't a professional prophet - if you like, he wasn't a pastor or a minister - his father wasn't a prophet, he wasn't the son of a prophet, he didn't go to a 'Prophetic School' - if you like, he didn't go to a Bible College - but the fact of the matter is, as we look at this chapter of scripture today, this man Amos, this man Burdened, was God's man, for God's day, with God's message. And he stands before the people, and he preaches a message, and he preaches against and denounces their luxury. He preaches against their lack of concern, and care, and compassion for the poor. He condemns their expensive houses, he condemns their drinking, he condemns their complacency, he condemns their costly parties and rich living. He condemns the philosophy, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. He condemns the fact that those who are fiddling the books, those who are getting rich through false gain, are the very ones who are religious. He condemns the fact that they use religion as a masquerade for their false living.

Do you know what the big problem was? If you read this book, you will see that these very people, the very people who are religious, the very people who are going to all the services, the very people who are taking the name of Jehovah, the name of the Lord - these are the same people that are shouting: 'We are looking for

the day of His coming! We are looking for the day of the Lord, when the Lord will come and when the Lord will judge the earth and we will be free from all our enemies', these were the very people that were asking for this - but the message of Amos is this: 'Woe unto thee! Woe unto you that are at ease in Zion, because you are calling for the coming of the Lord, but when the Lord comes it will not be your enemies that will be judged - it will be you!'

Do you see any parallel? Do you? What do Christians long for today? Christians long for the coming of the Lord! And that's right, and Christians yearn for the coming of the Lord, but so many of the Christians that yearn after His coming and are looking for the glory of His coming, are not ready for His coming! Christian, are you at ease in Zion today? The nation of Israel, there was peace and prosperity, there was luxury that there never was before, everything seemed to be going well, everyone was prospering - yet this man, this rustic preacher, God's man with God's message was standing out there shouting 'Woe!'. That wasn't what the people wanted to hear, that wasn't what the people expected to hear, but he was shouting 'Woe unto them that are at ease in Zion!'

Did our Lord not speak like that in Matthew chapter 7 and verse 22? Turn with me to it, Matthew chapter 7 and verse 22 - verse 21 to get the context, He says this: 'Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have we not cast out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then', the Lord says, 'I profess unto them, I never knew you!'. Just like these Israelites: 'We're going to the meetings, we're going to the services of God, we're performing the services, we're breaking the bread at the shewtable, we're doing everything that is meant to be done - we're singing the songs of Zion, we're worshipping the God of Zion, we're looking for the day of the Lord's coming!'. But Amos says: 'Listen!', like the Lord, he says, 'There will be many in that day that will say 'Lord, Lord, did we not do this in Your name? Did we not even lead one to Christ in Your name? Did we not preach in Your name? Did we not sing, or testify in Your name?', and He will say: 'I never knew you!'

We find it in Colossians chapter 1 and verse 23, Colossians 1 and verse 23, we read: 'And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreprouvable in his sight:' - verse 23 - 'If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled'. If you have a pen this morning, ring that word 'if' - 'if you continue in the faith'. 'If', there's a condition! Now I'm not preaching here that you can be saved one day and lost the next - I don't believe that - but somehow, somewhere along the line, we've forgotten about something. We've forgotten that we are to be living in fellowship with God today, and if we don't live in fellowship with God today, we cannot be 100% sure of our situation before Him. Spurgeon counselled preachers never to give a man who is in sin at this moment assurance of his salvation. Never do it! We're to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, we're to make sure that we're in the faith by the way that we live. Let me ask you, Christian or professing Christian, this morning, listen: Are you at ease in Zion today? Are you? Are you at ease in Zion when the church is dormant? The church of Jesus Christ - as far as I can see - is absolutely asleep! It's the greatest dormant volcano that has ever existed! And I think, as I read the book of Revelation, that we're like the church of Sardis - in fact, I don't even know what church we're like, we're like them all! The church of Sardis, the Lord said of them: 'Thou hast a name that thou livest, and are dead'.

Now let's not pass the buck this morning, we're evangelical - and evangelicals have a name that they live, but do you know what the reality is today? They're dead! Maybe you think I'm being too harsh. They have a name that they live - Baptists have a name that they live, evangelical Christians have a name - but the reality could be, this morning, that we're dead! We could be like Laodicea, we say to ourselves: 'We are rich, we are increased with goods and have need of nothing' - and we know not, the Lord says, that we are wretched, miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked! And He says to us: 'Thou art neither hot nor cold, I would that

you were hot or cold, but you're lukewarm', and He says, 'I'm going to spew you, I'm going to vomit you out of my mouth!'

Are you at ease in Zion this morning believer? Answer the question! You might be saying to me: 'But hold on David, you've forgotten the doctrine of 'once you're saved, you're always saved, you're never lost'. I have not forgotten it! I believe it with all my heart! But we have forgotten the doctrine of perseverance! You might say: 'David - Matthew 16 and verse 18 when the Lord Jesus spoke to Peter and spoke about the confession that he made, and said 'On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it' - David, have you forgotten about that verse? God is going to build the church and the gates of the hell will never, ever prevail against it'. That's right, but that answer that you may give me this morning is the same thing that the children of Israel said in Amos. They said, 'It's alright, don't worry, we're secure! We're saved - and that's the main thing - as long as we're saved'. And they lived whatever way they wanted, and they were looking for the day of His coming because they were saved, they were secure - and that was their problem.

Do you remember years ago - who were the pioneer missionaries to Africa? People from the United Kingdom, weren't they? Great men of God, pioneer missionaries all over the world - like Carey, Hudson Taylor, all those great men - they were from the Western world, as it were, our little world of Europe, or America. Do you know what the reality is today? The missionaries going to London are coming from Africa! The places we once sent missionaries to are sending missionaries to us! Christ says in Revelation, that He will spew us out of His mouth! Is that 'saved and lost'? I don't think so - but don't ask me what it means - it scares me. But listen this morning: a wee dose of 'saved and lost' wouldn't do us any harm! If we tried to please God everyday! Have you seen the Mormons? Have you see the Jehovah's Witnesses? I know they're working for their salvation, but they live their lives for their ideology - and God help them, it's for the devil and demons, but they're living it out!

I hope I don't think, today, that God hasn't the power and the sovereign will and ability to lay me aside and to raise up another. And don't think today, Christian - don't think today evangelical church, or Baptist church - that God can't lay you aside and raise up another people! Because that's exactly what He did with Israel, isn't it? He promised them, and they were covenant promises, but there were conditions, and they didn't fulfil the conditions, so for a season He has led them aside and He raised up the church unto Himself.

Did you watch the television on Wednesday night on 'UTV Live Insight'? There was a programme about how the decline in church membership is at an all-time low. Did you see it? I've never seen such nut-cases in all my life! Never. And because the church of Jesus Christ is dwindling - and it is - we are going to all extremes to try and get people in, and we can save people through entertainment - but do you know what we're going to have to do? We have to then keep them by entertainment, because the word of God is not enough for them! But listen, listen: are we at ease in Zion, this morning, when the church is dormant?

Are we at ease in Zion when the world is damned? Are we? Let me ask you a question: who were the people that Jesus came to save? Do you know who they were? Christ Jesus came into the world to save - what? - sinners! He came to save the prostitute, He came to save the drunkard, the gambler, He came to save the homosexual, He came to save the publican, He came to save the terrorist, He came to save the murderer, He came to save the thief - all these evil people He came to save! Now, another question: what kind of people are we the furthest away from? Those people! Those people that God sent His Son to save and to rescue!

I have a friend, and you're going to hear his testimony not too long from now. He's already testified in the young peoples fellowship. But my friend had a life of sin, a life of - if the expression could be used - hell on earth, it was awful! And God gloriously saved him, and now he's fellowshiping, he's testifying, he's serving the Lord - but he still goes through problems, like us all. And he was confiding in me one day, and he was

worried about the place where he lived, and about the people who were living round him - he found temptation, he found it hard - and he was asking, and confiding, in some people in the church that I used to go to, and he just said to me in despair, he said: 'David, it's alright for them, they get into their car and they drive away!'. [It's] because we're removed, we're removed.

Another question - and this isn't really a sermon this morning, this is from my heart: do you believe in hell? Do you? Don't give me the answer I'm looking for - do you really believe in hell? I know you know about it in your head, and you learnt about it from Sunday School, since you were at the children's meetings - I know all these things, because I know them as well - but do you really believe? An atheist once said to a Christian - an atheist! - 'If I believed what you believed about hell, I would crawl on my hands and knees, across beds of broken glass and hot ashes, to the four corners of the earth to tell people - to warn people of hell!'. Do you believe in hell, Christian?

Charles Finney, a great American revivalist of the 1800's, [who] brought many souls to Christ, was used as an instrument of God for revival. He said this, that as Christians we need to do something - it's an exercise we need to do. We need to take a New Testament, we need to take our Bibles and we need to open them at every passage that mentions hell. Go through it - say Matthew's gospel, go through the verses that talk about hell - and he says this: 'Take a member of your family and place them in that verse'. He says, 'Pretend that you're looking into hell with a telescope' - this is what he says - 'and put your little girl there!' and then you'll know the cost of hell. Do you believe in hell?

'Oh, but David, people will say that they don't like that kind of hell-fire preaching - they say that they like the kind of Christianity that's personal, that's private, that you can see it just with your life and you don't try and share anything with anybody, or you don't try and convert anybody'. Well, listen to me: do you know those type of Christians? They couldn't care if you went to hell for all eternity. They don't care! But you, Christian this morning in Thomas Street, do you believe in a place called hell? We've forgotten that the Gospel is an offence - Jesus said that the Gospel would be a stumbling block, that it would either be the saver of life to a person, or the saver of death. Now that doesn't mean that we preach it in an offensive manner, or in a rude manner, but the Gospel itself is an offence. Charles Wesley, the great revivalist in England, who as a matter-of-fact stemmed civil war and revolution because of his preaching of the gospel - that man used to ask his open-air preachers, when they came back from a time of preaching, he asked them two questions. The first one was this: did anybody get saved? If the answer was 'No' to that question, then he asked another question, and he said: well, was anybody offended? And if the answer was 'No' to that question, he would tell the men to go back to their day job, they had not the gift to preach.

Have we forgotten? Have we forgotten what the gospel of Christ is? It's not a wee nice story! It's about sin! It's about a cross! It's about blood! It's about judgement! But it's about deliverance from it all! And we cannot bring people to Christ if they are not brought to the law first of all to see what they really are, to see their sin in the mirror of God's word - and then, when we point them to Christ, then it'll be good news!

Could a mariner sit idle if he heard the drowning cry?
 Could a doctor sit in comfort and just let his patients die?
 Could a fireman sit idle, let men burn and give no hand?
 Can you sit, Christian, at ease in Zion while the world around you is damned?

A wise man in Athens was once asked when injustice would be abolished - when injustice in the world, in society, in workplaces, in education, when civil rights would be established, and when justice would be established and injustice abolished. He said this, listen: 'This will happen when those who are not wrong - those who are not wrong - feel as indignant as those who are'. When those who are not wrong - put it into a Christian context - when those who are in Christ see the need of those who are not in Christ. When those

who are under no condemnation, because of the law of the Spirit which has set us free, when we see the condemnation that the child of the devil is under - then we will cease to be at ease in Zion while the world around is damned.

George Bernard Shaw - not a theologian, but a wise man nevertheless - said this: 'The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them'. Are you indifferent to the lost today? Oh, are you indifferent? Can you not hear the cries from hell today? I hope I can hear them! The cries of my friends, the cries of family, who I never told about those fires! Can you not hear them in your ear today? Do they not drive you out the door to tell people of Christ and His gospel?

I want you to turn to Samuel, 1 Samuel 17 - and we have in 1 Samuel 17 the story of David and Goliath, and you all know the story well. You remember that the little boy David, you remember when the prophet Samuel came to anoint the future King - they all laughed when he went to David, because David was like me - he was short, he was only a boy - and these other men were tall and they were big strapping soldiers, and they expected the next King of Israel to be like them, but Samuel went to this little insignificant shepherd boy. And then later on in the story, you remember that David's father Jesse sent out David to his brothers, who were fighting in the battle - he took with him cheese and bread. And you remember, when he got there David said these words - they were all talking about the Philistine, Goliath, they were talking about how he'd come out to the front of the whole host and army of Israel, and how he'd shouted: 'Send me someone who can beat me! Any of you Israelites come and beat Goliath the great - Goliath the giant!'. And David said these words as he heard them talk about it, he said in verse 29, sorry 26: 'For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?'. Now think about it, a wee lad, a wee lad chirps up: 'Who is this Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?'. And all the boys look round and, you know, laugh - and after their laughter David turned to each of them one at a time and said, in verse 29: 'Is there not a cause? Is there not a cause? It's alright you laughing, boys, it's alright you thinking I'm too weak and I'm too small - but is there not a cause? Is the name of God not at stake here? Is there not a battle to be fought and is there not a battle to be won?'

Is there not a cause, Christian, today? Is there not a church that is asleep? Is there not a world, a family, our families that are in hell? They're in hell now! Because they're condemned already! Is there not a cause? And all that it took was this wee fella David, with a heart full of faith - all it took - and he defied the armies of the Philistines, and he cut down the giant. And do you know something today? We have a cause that is better than David's - do you know why? Because our battle is already won! And we are not fighting for the victory, but we are fighting in the victory, and from victory and we cannot lose - if we only would take up the fight and have a heart of faith!

Are you at ease in Zion? When the Church is dormant, and the world is damned, is there not a cause? Do you know something? There is nothing uninteresting about Christianity, nothing. But I'll tell you what there is, uninterested Christians. Nothing uninteresting about Christianity, but uninterested Christians! Christians that couldn't give two hoots! Turn with me again to Acts chapter 17 and verse 16, 'Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry'. When Paul was in Athens he looked around him and - to put it in our modern context - he saw the chapel, he saw the dead Protestant churches, he saw the mosques, he saw the cults, he saw the paganism, and he lifted his eyes to God and to Christ and he cried, because his heart was stirred within him because of the idolatry in his land. Christian will you not stir yourself? Will you not stir yourself to all the idolatry and sin that is in your land? Does it not drive you to your knees? Does it not bring tears to your eyes? Does it not move you, does it not stir you?

If you've ever taken your mother to a football match, or watched a football match, young fellas will know that you're sitting through the football match, or watching it on the television, and your mother's sitting there:

'Now what's that? What's he doing there? And what's that? Why did he blow the whistle? What's that line for there?'. And you're sitting through the whole match explaining that to [her]. And then your team - whatever your team is - then your team scores a goal, and then you jump through the roof because of it, and you're clapping, and you're shouting - and your mother turns to you and she says 'Well what are you doing?'. [You say] 'He scored a goal!', and she says 'Well is that not what he's meant to do?'. Wait till I tell you - there are people coming to churches today, and they are expecting to hear about Christ, they're expecting to hear about the Gospel, they are expecting to be told what to do to be saved, they're expecting all these things - because that's what you're meant to hear, and when somebody shouts 'Hallelujah' or 'Amen' or gets excited, they look at him! 'Sure this is what's meant to happen!'

Will you not stir yourself Christian? Oh, let me look at the crowd, as my Saviour did, till my eyes with tears grow dim. Let me look and see the wandering sheep, and love them for love of Him! All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing.

I want to, in closing, turn you to Hosea, Hosea chapter 12, chapter 10 sorry - Hosea chapter 10 verse 12, Hosea chapter 10 verse 12 - and another rustic prophet, a voice like John the Baptist that we've been learning about in these past weeks, a voice in the wilderness - that means a voice on his own, no one else was shouting his message, because it wasn't comfortable - he says this, verse 12 of chapter 10: 'Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till he come and rain righteousness upon you'.

You're here this morning and you're not saved. You're not saved and you've heard this message week, after week, after week, and do you know what's happened? The god of this world, that is not Jehovah, the god of this world who is Satan, has blinded your eyes. Now take it from me, because it's in the word of God, he has blinded your eyes to the fact that there's a hell! And that at this very moment that you are literally dangling over that place! And each time you hear the Gospel, and each time you refuse the Gospel, you're being put down a little lower to that torment! Do you know what you need to do? You need to today break up that fallow ground, for it is time - now - to seek the Lord.

If there's any farmers here they will know what fallow ground is - I didn't know what it was being a Belfast man - but it's land that has never been broken up for a few months or a few years. It's land that has been left, while another piece of land has been used to grow crops in. And what the prophet is saying here is, 'You have fallow ground Christian, you have ground that hasn't been used in a long time'. That could be the ground of prayer, that could be the ground of fasting, that could be the ground of reading the word of God, of witnessing to people, that could be the ground of going to the Bible Study, the prayer meeting or the outreach, and it hasn't been broken [up] - and what the prophet is saying here is: 'Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy and break up that fallow ground break it all up, go back to it and use it, use it and then when you use it, there will be a harvest'.

Christian, it's time to seek the Lord. It's time. Our land is falling to bits, and the church is following suit, and we need a revival today, but do you know something? He'll only do it through us. Campbell Morgan - not Campbell Morgan - another revivalist in the Hebrides, was at the Bangor Missionary Convention. He was sitting, sitting now, up here at the Bangor Missionary Convention and he was just about to get up to speak at the very last message of the whole convention and the Lord by the Holy Spirit told him - don't ask me how - but told him to get off his seat and go to the Hebrides Islands. He went over to the speaker and he asked the speaker could he be given leave, because he had to go and the speaker said 'Well hold on a minute, you're giving the next message. You can't just get up and leave!'. But he had to, he was compelled by the Spirit - a man under the Spirit of God - and he went. And when he reached the shores of the Isles of Lewis, there was one man waiting for him, and he just said 'I've been waiting on you'. And the other question he asked him was this, 'Are you right with the Lord?'. And that man said that he does not know what would have

happened, if he had went all that way and he had been faced with that question, and he was not right with the Lord, and the Lord did not trust him with revival.

Christian, what would you do today if God visited your bedside with a cloud of mercy, and was willing to open it and let it burst and rain righteousness upon you - but you weren't there? I believe that that is what God wants to do, and all we have to do is fulfil what He asks of us.

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